



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07576316 3

S
AND
GREY RUSSET
E. TEMPLE THURSTON

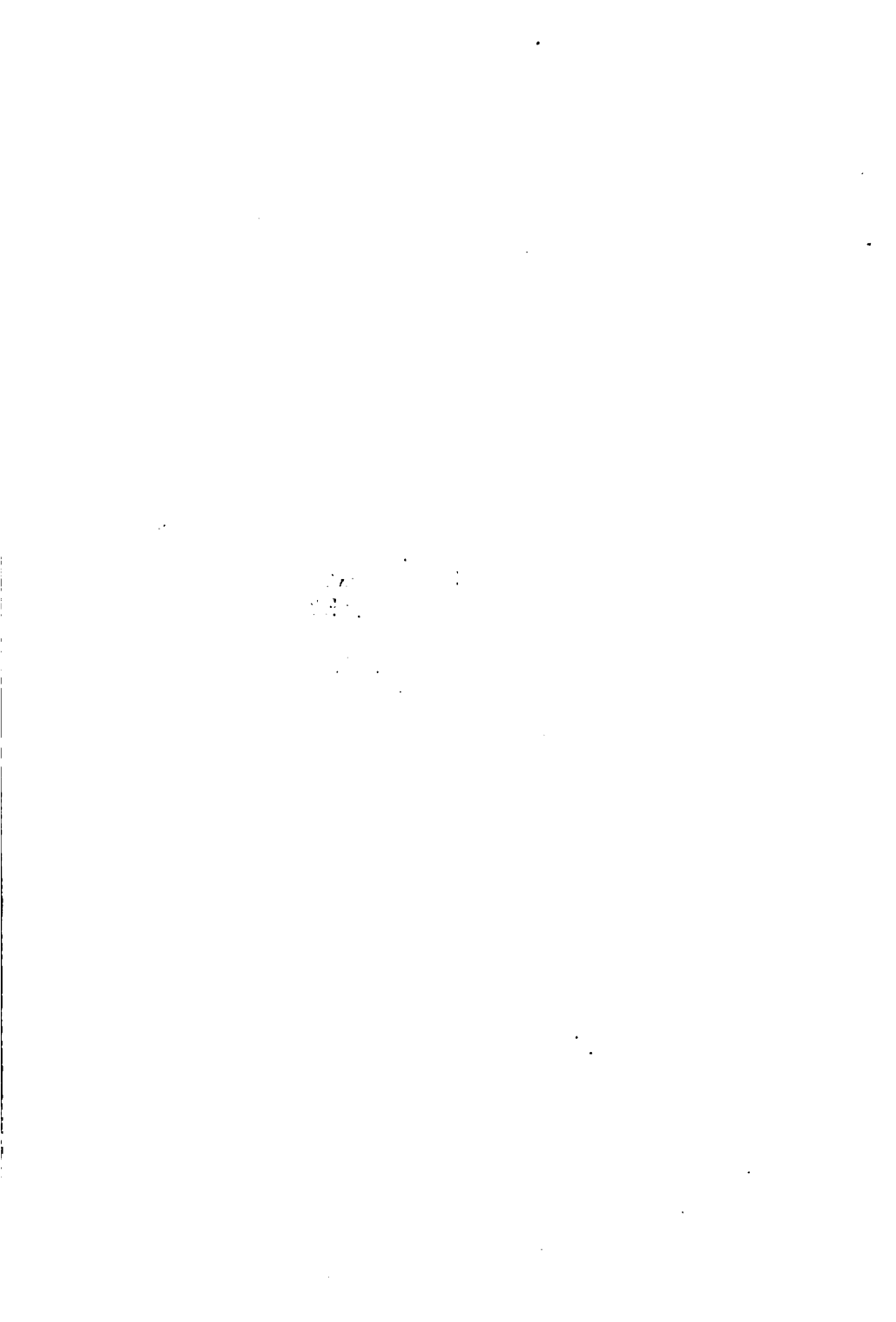




F - 100-100000

Section 16 (1) (a)

Sheepskins and Grey Russet



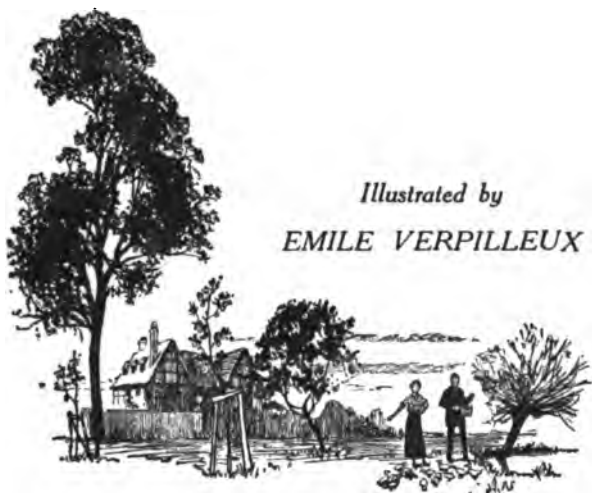
THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION



*"The evening before my departure
circumstance presented me with the
only opportunity since her illness of
having a talk with Bellwattle."*

**SHEEPSKINS &
GREY RUSSET
E. Temple Thurston**

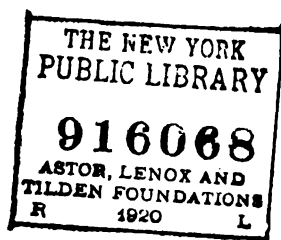


Illustrated by
EMILE VERPILLEUX

**G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press**

1920

RECEIVED
JAN 10 1921
LIBRARY



COPYRIGHT, 1920
BY
E. TEMPLE THURSTON



NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

Dedicated
TO
My DAUGHTER
OLIVE



My Dearest,

Do you remember one wet day, when, at your wit's end to know what to do with yourself, you discovered some of the M.S. of this book lying about and, picking it up, began to read? I was there in the room and covertly watched you. It was the first piece of my work for which you had ever evinced a degree of interest. When then I saw you begin to smile and finally to chuckle quietly with laughter, I felt no end of a dog. But when, at the conclusion of a chapter, you looked up and said—"You know this isn't half bad," then in a sudden rush of vanity, I swore to myself you should have the book for your own whether you liked it or not.

So here it is, and if honestly you can give me that same uplifting criticism at the last page as at the first, I shall get a collar and a lead, and, praying that the muzzling order will be over by then, shall become your humble slave, as also I am,

RYE—1919.

YOUR DADDY.



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—A SETTLED CONVICTION . . .	I
II.—GETTING CREDIT . . .	9
III.—BUYING A HOUSE . . .	15
IV.—SELLING A HOUSE . . .	25
V.—COLLECTING A CROWD . . .	33
VI.—THE SHOCK ABSORBER . . .	43
VII.—FITTING A MOOD . . .	51
VIII.—MANURIAL VALUES . . .	59
IX.—CRUIKSHANK IN THE MARKET . .	69
X.—THE ULTIMATE PURCHASE . . .	79
XI.—THE CREAKING HINGE . . .	87
XII.—THE MÊLÉE . . .	97
XIII.—BEYOND THE FIELD'S EDGE . . .	107
XIV.—THE GLIMMERING OF COMMONSENSE	117
XV.—HEALING PROPERTIES . . .	127
XVI.—BRINGING HOME THE MUCK CART	139
XVII.—FOUR DUCKS ON A POND . . .	143

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII.—RED TAPE	165
XIX.—PUBLIC SPIRIT	175
XX.—MOWING THE SHILSHARD FIELD	187
XXI.—PUDDIMORE ACTS SUSPICIOUSLY	195
XXII.—PUDDIMORE EXPLAINS	205
XXIII.—GREAT DAYS	217
XXIV.—ADVICE TO FATHERS	229
XXV.—A SOLOMON COME TO JUDGMENT	239
XXVI.—BONNY CONVEYS A PROTEST	249
XXVII.—THE HOOP WITH A GAP IN IT	261
XXVIII.—A GENUFLEXION OF THE MIND	271
XXIX.—THE ULTIMATE SURRENDER	281
XXX.—THE ISSUE	291
XXXI.—THE KEY OF THE CABINET	295
XXXII.—THE LAST EVENING	303



*Oh the sweet contentment
The countryman doth find!
Heigh trolollie lollie loe,
Heigh trolollie lee.
That quiet contemplation
Possesseth all my mind;
Then care away,
And wend along with me.*

*For Courts are full of flattery,
As hath too oft been tried;
Heigh trolollie lollie loe, etc.
The city full of wantonness,
And both are full of pride;
Then care away, etc.*

*But oh, the honest countryman
Speaks truly from his heart,
Heigh trolollie lollie loe, etc.*

A Poem

*His pride is in his tillage,
His horses, and his cart;
Then care away, etc.*

*Our cloathing is good sheep-skins,
Grey russet for our wives;
Heigh trolollie lollie loe, etc.
'Tis warmth and not gay cloathing
That doth prolong our lives;
Then care away, etc.*

*The ploughman, though he labour hard,
Yet on the holy-day,
Heigh trolollie lollie loe, etc
No emperor so merrily
Does pass his time away;
Then care away, etc.*

*This is not half the happiness
The countryman enjoys;
Heigh trolollie lollie loe, etc.
Though others think they have as much,
Yet he that says so lies;
Then come away,
Turn countrymen with me.*

Coridon's Song from *The Compleat Angler*.

Chapter I
A SETTLED CONVICTION



"The whole neighbourhood is startled by the announcement of a settled conviction."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

CHAPTER I

A SETTLED CONVICTION



HERE was a quality of temperament, jointly shared by Cruikshank and Bellwattle, yet never alluded to in previous records touching upon their history.

They were vagabonds.

There was a wandering spirit in their natures, revealing itself in different ways, yet sufficiently in harmony to express itself in a common purpose. They could not stay in one abode more than three years at the utmost. I have known them move all their furniture and belongings one hundred and thirty miles and leave the place of their destination in six months.

It was not that they were wanting in a sense of affection for a home; it was that they had affection for so many. To my certain knowledge Bellwattle

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

has had her eye on Haddon Hall, Lambeth Palace, a whole house in Adelphi Terrace, a four-roomed cottage in Kent, and a mansion in the heart of Surrey, all as possible and enchanting homes in which, if she had her will, she would set up house the day after tomorrow.

Judging by the advertisements one sees in the daily papers, and carefully examining the lists on the house-agents' books, Lambeth Palace never appears as if it were to let and Haddon Hall, so to speak, keeps itself to itself. In other words, Bellwattle has to be content with what she can get, and possesses that inestimable quality of being satisfied, so long as Cruikshank is happy. Whatever it may be, she gratifies all the vagabond appetite that consumes her. On an average they move house every two years.

When I left them in Ireland after my marriage with my Clarissa, they were assured they had found the one place in the world of which they could make a home.

Showing me round his garden, Cruikshank had said, "Here I stay for the rest of my life. I want nothing better than this."

Introducing me to her little private sitting-room with its Queen Anne walnut desk, its chairs as she liked them, and her portraits of Darwin and

A Settled Conviction

Cruikshank on the walls, not to speak of the Spode china she washed every other week, Bellwattle said, "I like a place you feel you can settle down in. This is a room I can quite complacently—" she looked at me out of the corner of her eye, for it was a word of considerable magnitude to get right the first time—"quite complacently see myself getting old in."

She was so pleased with that word that she swaggered about it. When I say swaggered, I mean she adopted the attitude of one who knows what she is talking about, to the extent of quite forgetting what she has said.

Anyhow, in three months after Clarissa and I were married, they had moved.

From accounts I received, I understood it happened this way.

They had been on a visit to the English Lakes, and were motoring back to London to stay a week or two with friends. Apparently they took a circuitous route, for seeing Tewkesbury indicated on a signpost as being only thirty-five miles away, they turned to the right and went there.

Bellwattle knew there had been a battle fought in that place, in addition to which she liked its name.

It would seem that once a woman's fancy is

stirred, her imagination availed itself, it rises and calls upon her, it crosses her intuitions. In the midst of all this, while externally she has been being remote and undisturbed, the hold of her nature is up betwixt her, or a door of her mind, is shut, the whole neighbourhood of her mind is a movement of a settled course.

They had turned off to the right, in a space of five minutes, both of them. Cradock assures me he was in particular when, in one of his moments, Bellwinkle said—

"I shouldn't be surprised to see you."

Being that they had only been a twenty-one year house of Cradock's confidence he was

"Then from twenty-one years of being at my side."

"Simply," said he, "the whole you come to live in T."

I never knew whether we had really appreciated what

or whether, ignoring commonsense, like that of Cruikshank's on this occasion, they are merely meeting opposition with guile.

Whichever it was with Bellwattle, she took no notice of his remark.

"What was the date of the battle of Tewkesbury?" she asked, which was about the most effective blow she could have struck at him. In some former records of these two happy people, it has been shown how Cruikshank clung to his belief in the superiority of intelligence and education in the male.

"Never," he once said to me, "Never let a woman see that you don't know. If for instance she asks you the name of a plant and you don't know it, say something in Latin. You must keep your end up."

But when she asked him the date of the battle of Tewkesbury, there was no such device as this for getting out of the difficulty.

"The date of the battle of Tewkesbury?" he repeated, and then she knew exactly where she was. "Let me see—it was fought between—" he paused. I can scarcely suppose he was ignorant of that. Indeed his ruse becomes apparent as the conversation, related to me by Bellwattle, proceeds.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

stirred, her imagination awakes. Without delay it rises and calls upon her instinct which in turn arouses her intuitions. In the space of five minutes, whilst externally she has all the appearance of being remote and undisturbed, the whole household of her nature is up betimes. A window then, or a door of her mind, is suddenly flung open and the whole neighbourhood is startled by the announcement of a settled conviction.

They had turned off to the right and, for the space of five minutes, both of them were silent. Cruikshank assures me he was thinking of nothing in particular when, in one of those startling moments, Bellwattle said—

"I shouldn't be surprised if we lived in Tewkesbury."

Seeing that they had only enjoyed three years of a twenty-one year lease of their house in Ireland, Cruikshank confesses he was not a little alarmed.

"Three from twenty-one," said he with the full intention of being as matter-of-fact as possible, "is eighteen."

Swiftly she asked him why he said that.

"Simply," said he, "that you'll be forty-eight when you come to live in Tewkesbury."

I never know whether women have second sight and really appreciate what they are talking about,

A Settled Conviction

or whether, ignoring commonsense, like that of Cruikshank's on this occasion, they are merely meeting opposition with guile.

Whichever it was with Bellwattle, she took no notice of his remark.

"What was the date of the battle of Tewkesbury?" she asked, which was about the most effective blow she could have struck at him. In some former records of these two happy people, it has been shown how Cruikshank clung to his belief in the superiority of intelligence and education in the male.

"Never," he once said to me, "Never let a woman see that you don't know. If for instance she asks you the name of a plant and you don't know it, say something in Latin. You must keep your end up."

But when she asked him the date of the battle of Tewkesbury, there was no such device as this for getting out of the difficulty.

"The date of the battle of Tewkesbury?" he repeated, and then she knew exactly where she was. "Let me see—it was fought between—" he paused. I can scarcely suppose he was ignorant of that. Indeed his ruse becomes apparent as the conversation, related to me by Bellwattle, proceeds.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"Don't tell me," said he, "that you don't know the sides that fought in the battle of Tewkesbury?"

Well, she did not know, and then apparently he told her, adding that the date was 1465, and with such a tone of assurance that she could not contradict him. She knew he had just made a guess, and the chances were a thousand to one he was wrong.

"All the same," said she, "I shouldn't wonder if we were going to live in Tewkesbury."

So, it would seem, you can shake a woman's confidence about a fact, even when she knows your information is mere guesswork. But once that whole household of her nature is awake, there is no confuting her settled convictions with common-sense.

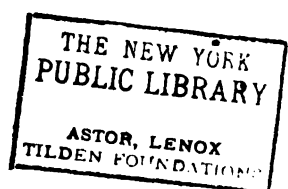
I hope the vote won't change them



Chapter II

GETTING CREDIT





CHAPTER II

GETTING CREDIT



WO customs always maintained with Cruikshank and Bellwattle whenever they were travelling in their car.

At every shop they passed in any town or village which bore the mystic sign—Antiques—they stopped, well out of sight, so that the proprietor might not see the car. Had he been any judge of cars it is my opinion it would not have mattered in the least.

By this means, over a matter of seven or eight years they had made a collection of furniture, china, and glass at an expenditure that would have made many a dealer's mouth water—a physiological function, from what I have seen of dealers, it might be happier to avoid.

This was one custom. The second consisted in visiting the principal house-agent in any town where they happened to be staying the night.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

It might not be that they wanted a house in that particular neighbourhood, so much as that looking over houses and imagining what one would do with them if they were one's own is the greatest fun in the world. I am quite with them in this. Once I accompanied them when they looked over a place with thirty bedrooms and one reception room, amongst many, that was forty-eight by twenty-five. Cruikshank chose an oak-panelled suite of rooms, including bathroom, bedroom and sitting-room, all tucked away at the end of an oak-panelled passage. Bellwattle selected a Queen Anne panelled suite with the same accommodation, and then together they wandered through the vast establishment, considering what they could do with the other twenty-eight bedrooms.

I am convinced that the old gardener who showed them round thought they were going to take the place. I am convinced, as they were going from one room to another, each one more suggestively fascinating than the last, they thought they were going to take it themselves.

It was only as we left the place out of sight on our way back to the house-agents, and I said, "Really rather a nice place that, with those panelled suites completely shut off. You'd be able to go and stay with each other for week-ends

Setting Credit

—"it was only when I said that, that Bellwattle asked me if I thought it were too large.

I assumed a tone of dubiety which made her feel how interested I was in their affairs.

"It all depends," said I, "what you and Cruikshank intend to do with it. Did you think of starting a school? I fancy myself it would be too big for a private hospital. You'd never get patients enough to fill it."

She gazed at me quite seriously, but with a swift interrogating look. I always feel Bellwattle would never believe in me again were I to smile or laugh when she looks at me like that. I kept my countenance.

"We—we were just—just going to live there ourselves," said she.

Having no control over his facial muscles in these affairs, Cruikshank burst out laughing. That was his lookout. He is her husband. I glanced across at him in surprise. If I had not done that, I think she would have lost all confidence in me.

Anyhow, they did not take the house and only a little while ago I heard Cruikshank say—

"Do you remember that house we went to see down near Ashford in Kent?"

Bellwattle sighed.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

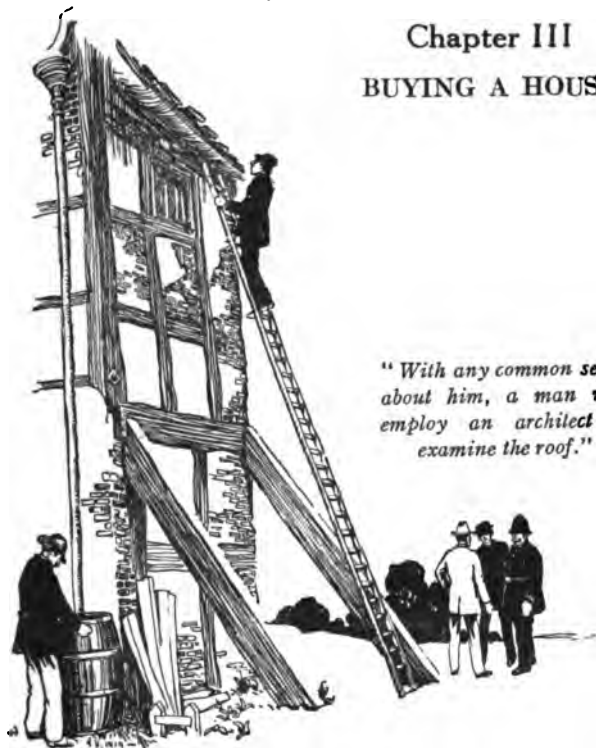
“Lucky thing for you, my dear, with the servant problem as it is, that I realised it was too large.”

Some men get their credit damn cheap.



Chapter III

BUYING A HOUSE



*"With any common **sense**
about him, a man **will**
employ an architect **to**
examine the roof."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER III

BUYING A HOUSE



It was this custom of visiting house-agents by which they came into possession of their farm outside Tewkesbury, the management of which, in the hands of Cruikshank, Bellwattle and an old drunkard of a farm-hand, goes to make this record of the experiences of a gentleman farmer.

They walked into the offices of the house-agent in Tewkesbury High Street and asked the freckle-faced boy across the counter whether they had any old houses on their books.

The freckle-faced boy introduced them into the house and estate agent's private office which had had the same papers on the desk, the same carpet on the floor, the same pictures and estate maps on the walls since the business was established in 1771.

The house agent himself came forward with the same courteous manner that his great-great-

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

grandfather had shown when one hundred and forty years before he was doubtless considered to be the most go-ahead and businesslike man in Tewkesbury.

To Cruikshank and Bellwattle this atmosphere had as good as sold them the house before they had seen it. When they had heard it was half-timbered, that it had been standing there in the midst of its little village two miles out of Tewkesbury at the time of the famous battle, that it had an oak-panelled hall with an Elizabethan mantelpiece and staircase, together with a Queen Anne panelled dining-room, they seized the order-to-view as though it had been a free pass into Paradise, and went there with fear at their heels that half the world might get there and take it before them.

They read the prospectus as they went along. It spoke of mullioned windows, of a quaint old belfry, the bell of which was intended to summon the farm-hands to their meals out of the hayfields. It hinted at a beautiful kitchen-garden with box-edging a good foot thick.

"A great harbour for slugs," said Cruikshank deprecatingly, though he was even more prepared to like the place than she.

"Surely slugs wouldn't prevent you from taking



© 1914. L. A. 700-

*"It's funny to think we
shall be living here for
the rest of our lives."*

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

a lovely old house if you could get it," Bellwattle replied with some annoyance. She always bridled readily at this matter-of-fact spirit in Cruikshank, and had never learnt that he was about as matter-of-fact as a minor poet.

"We shall know the minute we see it," said she; "we shall know whether we're going to live there. It can't be as good as this thing says—they never are."

But apparently it was. Before they had so much as entered the front door, Bellwattle was squeezing his arm, and Cruikshank, in the most casual voice he could command, was saying, "It's funny to think we shall be living here for the rest of our lives."

For there it was, about as perfect an example as you could get of the very earliest black and white, half-timbered manor house, standing just off the road that ran through the little village of Lemington. The roof was green with moss. The diamond-paned windows looked with wise eyes at the world which stretched before them in open meadows to the far crest of Bredon Hill.

Regarding that view and while they waited for the bell to be answered, Cruikshank whispered—

"In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;

Buying a House

Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near
A happy noise to hear."

"We'll have all the windows open," said Bellwattle, "and they'll come jangling down the valley——"

She had no time to finish her sentence. The door opened, and they were admitted to the oak-panelled hall with its slab-stone floor.

If there were not such things as drains, water supplies and kitchen ranges, this without doubt would be the way to take a house—much as a lover takes his mistress, there and then, when his heart is bursting, and she waits wondering and expectant on the verge of life.



A quaint old belfry, the bell of which was intended to summon the farm hands to their meals.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

So far as Bellwattle and Cruikshank were concerned, none of these things existed. They realised no defective drains till, in a manner of speaking, they noticed them. They knew nothing of water supplies till they found the tap in the bathroom would not respond to their persuasions. As for a kitchen range, they always asked the woman or gardener who showed them round whether it was a good one and the woman or gardener, as was their duty, saying it was the very best, they felt no more in heaven or on earth could well be done.

In half an hour they were back in the car, racing along the Gloucester Road to Tewkesbury, at the rate of forty miles an hour. Within another thirty minutes they were leaving the house-agent's office, the purchasers of Lemington Court in all but the formality of signing the contract.

Consistent with the well-balanced and material view of life, it must be admitted this is no way to purchase a house. With any commonsense about him, a man will employ an architect to examine the roof, to report upon the main structure. He will summon some sort of specialist in such matters to give his opinion about the drains. He will make enquiries about the condition of the soil, the health of the neighbourhood, and the kind of people in the parish.

Buying a House

A man of commonsense will choose his wife in the same way, making sure of her health, the quality of her antecedents, the full substance of her fortune if she has any, and her abilities as a housewife, how much she knows about the management of household affairs. Undoubtedly this is the way to select a wife.

To one, however, with blood in his veins and a heart beneath his waistcoat, it is not the way to live.

"We haven't had the drains examined," said Cruikshank. "We never asked whether the well ever runs dry. That's the only water supply. We don't know whether that roof's in good condition. It's Cotswold stone you know, and they're as heavy as the deuce. Do you remember that sort of buttress, that wooden prop on the right-hand side near the waterbutt. That must have been put there to keep up that wall. There was a big crack in it by the timber-work. How do we know that part of the house won't fall down?"

"How old is it?" asked Bellwattle.

"Well, it must be well over four hundred years. They say it's been in one family as long as that."

"In one family for over four hundred years," echoed Bellwattle. "Isn't that good enough for you? That's better than any architect's report.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

You like it, don't you? I mean really like it—love it? Isn't it nicer than any place we've ever seen?"

"Oh—yes, it's all that," said Cruikshank, "and that apple-orchard's ripping—so's the garden. The garden's corking. I've never seen box-edging like that. It must be well over a hundred years old. And did you hear the agent telling me that the garden's full of bulbs? In February I believe, so that old gardener said, it's a regular drift of snowdrops."

"Did he say—drift?" asked Bellwattle.

"No, that's what I see it from what he said."

She took his hand in Tewkesbury High Street, and she squeezed it. You have to be in love with snowdrops to think of a word like that. It was just knowing that he was in love with snowdrops, with Lemington Court, but most of all with life that made her squeeze his hand.

For Life after all is a man's first mistress, and if he does not tire of her—as so many do who approach her with an inspector of drains at their elbows—there is some hope for him in the heart of the woman he has taken to wife.

Bellwattle and Cruikshank cut their visit to London and went straight back to Ireland to dispose of their eighteen-year lease.

Chapter IV

SELLING A HOUSE



*"There was a damp patch
in one of the bedrooms."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION

CHAPTER IV

SELLING A HOUSE



FROM all I can understand, that is from various accounts given to me first by Cruikshank, then by Bellwattle, no less than from little remarks which have fallen between them in conversation, and are indelibly recorded on my memory, the sale of that lease was, as Cruikshank said—a bit of a business.

To begin with, he had spent money on the place. He spent money on every place he went to. When it is your first belief about a house that you are going to pass the rest of your life there, every justification is to your hand for a little capital outlay.

He had spent at least a thousand pounds.

“Well, I’ve got it ridiculously cheap,” he had argued at that time—“Sixty-five pounds a year rent for twenty-one years. I shan’t ever want

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

to let it, but if I did, I could easily get a hundred and sixty. That'll pay me back with interest."

These calculations solve themselves on paper with an ease that savours of real magic in its astounding simplicity. With Cruikshank working out the additions and subtractions, Bellwattle could assist him in comfort with the fingers of one hand. It was all as plain as daylight. They might take their profit magnificently in the form of a premium, or they might accept the whole affair in an economical spirit as an investment, yielding somewhere in the region of ten per cent.

"I may not be a business man in ordinary things," Cruikshank said, "but I've got an eye for an attractive place, that's what it amounts to."

All this self-assurance had been engendered in Cruikshank, because he had a flat in London, and once let it furnished for eight months at a nett profit of five guineas a week. Nothing could dissuade him then from the belief that he had a genius for that sort of thing.

"If I liked to make a business of it," he said to me on one occasion, "I could earn a comfortable income," and seeing it would have suited Bellwattle's passion to possess half, if not all the old houses in England, I believe she would have let him do it.

Selling a House

The sale of the lease in Ireland must have been a sore blow to him. He lost money. There was no doubt people liked the place, but as is the way with all those tenants who travel with a sanitary inspector at their elbows, they thought fifteen hundred pounds premium was a mighty sum of money. When also they heard the rent he was paying was only sixty-five pounds a year (a quixotic thing to have told them), and that he was asking one hundred and sixty, they felt injured at being thus forcibly deprived of so charming a place.

For it is the psychological attitude of mind of the prospective tenant that if a dwelling place is put on the market, it is something in the nature of an insult if not of an iniquity to be asked to pay for it more than they want to give. If the owner, asking a premium, assures them, with proof of receipts that he spent so much in alterations and decorations, they regard him as that fool who builds houses for wise men to live in, and for his folly must reap the consequences.

Nothing, apparently, would induce any of the people who came to see it, to pay the premium that Cruikshank was asking for his house in Ireland. And then, before he had sold the lease, even without profit at all, he did a foolish and preposterous thing. It convinced me, when he told me of it,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

that he had no more flair than a farthing dip for making money over houses. He signed the agreement for the purchase of Lemington Court.

When I heard he had done that, I turned in despair to Bellwattle.

"Why on earth did you let him do it?" I asked.

"Well—we wanted it," said she, and it was so easy to realise by the plaintive tone in her voice how it had come about. No man can refuse a woman who asks like that, especially when he is so much in need of the thing himself.

As a result of that transaction, it did not surprise me to hear how much more difficult had become the selling of the lease in Ireland. It seems you can only dispose of a thing with advantage when you are in two minds whether to part with it or not. Perhaps it is your manner, doubtless it is what is in your mind which makes you a good salesman. You praise the thing because you have a hankering after it yourself. You offer it for purchase, because you don't want to keep it. You put a big price on it, because you don't want to let it go. There is no situation intrigues a would-be purchaser more than this. He almost becomes eager to prove to you that your soul is not above money.

I have know an antique dealer bring this mental

Selling a House

condition to such a fine art, that he had only to put a thing an arm's length out of a customer's reach, and it was as good as sold for a handsome profit.

It was plain to see how, once he had bought Lemington Court, Cruikshank was passionately concerned to part with his lease in Ireland. And it must indubitably have come out in his manner as a salesman. Plenty of purchasers came, but by the time Cruikshank had shown them round and told them the price of the premium, they unaccountably lost interest and went away. He was too eager to sell.

There was a damp patch in one of the bedrooms. It came from a slight leak under the eaves. At first he had taken no trouble to conceal it.

"If people like the place," he had said, with a degree of confidence, "they'll take it. A damp patch that means nothing won't put 'em off."

But he changed his tone once he had purchased Lemington Court. At the last, when he sold his lease for a premium of seven hundred and fifty to two old spinster ladies, he was compelled to move a piece of furniture to cover the patch on the wall. And not only that, but failing to cover it entirely, Bellwattle had to stand before the guilty place to cover the remaining stain on the wallpaper whilst he was showing them round.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

There is no end to the kind of tricks a man must be up to in order to sell a house to advantage. And the best of them all is not to want to sell it to anyone. You talk of motor-car dealers and horse dealers as though they were the most dishonest of sharks. But no man wanting to sell anything in this world is honest. He may say nothing in its favour that is untrue; but he leaves out the deuce of a lot that is deprecatory.

When I taxed Bellwattle with the doubtful honesty of Cruikshank's behaviour in this matter, she had her answer, as no doubt she always would.

"He lost money over it," said she, "and besides, they could have moved the piece of furniture if they liked."

"How about you," said I, "they couldn't push you out of the way."

"I only happened to be standing there," she replied.

"A whole lot of things happen," said I, "in a world of affairs."



Chapter V

COLLECTING A CROWD



*"It only
needed a
crowd."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER V

COLLECTING A CROWD



HE purchase of the farm attached to Lemington Court was a transaction into which Cruikshank was jockeyed by his own sentiments and Bellwattle's love of animals.

Bellwattle, as has been explained elsewhere, was one of those women whose maternal emotions find greater play in the mothering of animals than ever they do in the nursing of babies. Such women are neither common, nor are they rare. From long watching of her, I am inclined to think that with all the modern and increasing regard for the welfare of children, it is the extreme helplessness of animals that makes its greater appeal to her. She is a mother, not so much, I imagine, because she would love to bring a young thing into the world, as because she would need to fight for it tooth and nail when once it was there.

With all the modern improvements in the care

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

of young children, with mothers giving their babies out to nurse rather than jeopardise the youthfulness of their figures, there is little tooth and nail about the business that is left. Women, so one told me recently, prefer the sound of the word *Glaxo* to that of the word suckle. Which is all a sign of the times. The old Anglo-Saxon words are going out of fashion with the old Anglo-Saxon deeds. A word has a precarious existence in any language when once the deed it expresses has become obsolete.

When Bellwattle heard that the mortality amongst calves in this country was something like fifty per cent., there came a look into her eyes one can only describe as savage.

"Fifty out of every hundred!" said she, for she hates these business terms and must always translate them aloud to herself. "Well, I think it's shocking! Children don't die like that! I wouldn't let calves die at that rate if I had the rearing of them!"

I am quite certain Cruikshank must have believed her when she said that. She would have convinced me. And Bellwattle, successfully rearing calves must have seemed to him half-way toward successful dairy farming. When then he found the farm buildings and the farmyard so

Collecting a Crowd

closely abutted on the out-houses of the Court, that the farmer, so to speak, would be for ever on his backdoor step; when also he learnt that the farmer of the extraordinary and unattractive name of Sniff was leaving at the end of the next quarter, and that another, who might have not only an unattractive name but an unattractive personality, would probably take the place, he came with a rush, like a bull with its head down, upon a conception of his life's purpose.

Leaping out of bed one morning—the place and time in which he did most of his serious thinking for the day—he came into Bellwattle's room.

"I've got an idea," said he.

Seeing that she was practically asleep and distantly conscious that her face was not yet powdered, Bellwattle turned away and pulled the bed-clothes tighter round her.

"I'm going to take the farm," he went on.

Bellwattle did not turn, but there was a certain rigidity about her shoulders under the quilt which gave him to know she was preparing to listen.

"It's only a hundred and forty acres," he continued, "and all pasture. Pasture's easier to work than arable."

"What's arable?" enquired a voice that was

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

muffled with sleep and distant by three blankets and a sheet.

Cruikshank felt he was like a Punch and Judy man beginning his performance in an empty street. It only needed a crowd. This was the beginning of it. The first urchin of her mind had arrived and, out of curiosity apparently, was prepared to wait and see what happened.

"Arable," said Cruikshank, "is the land you grow things on."

"Shouldn't care for that," said the urchin, and was about to turn away.

"Pasture's meadow land—the land you feed animals on."

"Get me my powder-puff," said Bellwattle, "it's in that silver box."

He fetched as he was bid. There were movements under the bed-clothes, and then a head appeared. The crowd was collecting.

"Are you going to rear calves?" she asked.

"Well, of course, it must be a dairy farm," Cruikshank informed her; "that's the way Sniff runs it. Dairy farms pay you know—pay jolly well."

She did not care about the financial aspect of the proposal. I can imagine in her vision just then, there were whole families of helpless animals looking to her for food and protection.

Collecting a Crowb

Telling me about this little incident, at this point Cruikshank said, "I could see her heart sticking out of her eyes."

Apparently she had wanted definite assurance about the calves. Vague talk concerning a dairy farm was not sufficient, and making it pay was of no interest at all. Making it pay meant selling animals, and getting rid of anything to which once she had given her heart was not in Bellwattle's conception of the best in life. Her policy with regard to a prolific though favourite cat may be remembered. Even when Cruikshank had pointed out to her the possibility in numbers over a space of three years if she did not drown the kittens, she had not been abashed. And it was with Bellwattle that she would always sooner put an animal to sleep than give it away to an uncertain home. It can be imagined then what a violation of her feelings the sale of a beast would be.

I asked Cruikshank if he had not realised that at the time, to which he replied, "Yes, that's all very well, but when a man's embarking on an enterprise like that, he can't think of everything. She knew we should have to sell the beasts if we were going to make it pay, and I told her I was looking on it as an investment of my capital."

Cruikshank's excursions into finance always con-

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

vinced me what an artist he was. Yet I remember his once showing me some water colours he had painted when I could not help thinking what a splendid man of business he would have made.

As a matter of fact, neither of them seem to have thought about the objection to selling their beasts. Cruikshank was too excited at the prospect of finding five per cent. for his money in that hundred and forty acres which I firmly believe he pictured as a sort of glorified garden, while Bellwattle could think of nothing but young animals growing up to sturdy maturity, regarding her as a kind of universal and all-understanding mother to whom inevitably they would be brought in pain or sickness for her patient care.

She did not see herself, as ultimately I saw her, spending a whole day with some sort of disinfectant, removing maggots from the fleece of an emaciated sheep, or occupied whole mornings with gloves on her hands, applying sulphur ointment to calves that were suffering from ringworm.

But this is anticipating the grim realities of history. That morning when Cruikshank came in with his idea to Bellwattle's bedroom, their imagination wandered in deep, green meadows set down for hay and in the adjoining fields—property that was their very own—Cruikshank saw

Collecting a Crowd

young steers and heifers with glossy coats fattening rapidly and profitably for the market, while Bellwattle beheld young lambs with overgrown legs and careering bodies, young calves she had protected against the devouring average of mortality, indeed everywhere some beast that would answer to her voice and be eager to nuzzle in her hand.

"When are you going to get the farm?" she asked.

"Next March quarter. Sniff goes out then. But we've got that orchard opposite the house. I'm going to graze a cow there and keep her in that shed in the corner. I shall get it thatched and made weather-tight. Then we've got the stables, and there's no reason why we shouldn't start rearing a few calves there so that we shall have some stock to start with."

"Who's going to rear the calves?" she asked.

"I don't know — I thought — you might —"

She sat bolt upright in bed.



Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"I don't know what to feed them on," said she.

"Oh, you'll learn," he replied.

With the mortality amongst calves standing at fifty per cent., I suggested that the calves would not be without some knowledge themselves before many meals had gone by.

"We never lost a calf all those three months till we took the farm over," declared Cruikshank.

"She reared ten. Ten of the best."

Of course some men have luck, and others have wives. In my opinion, Cruikshank has both.



Chapter VI

THE SHOCK ABSORBER



*"If only the door had
slammed."*

THE
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20535
TELEPHONE ROOM, LARGO
TILSON FOUNDATION

CHAPTER VI

THE SHOCK ABSORBER



SHALL not attempt, except as introduction to these agricultural adventures, to record anything but that to which I was an actual witness.

They were just in possession of the farm when I came to pay my visit to Lemington. By that time they were talking agricultural jargon, referring to the weight of pigs by the score and calculating the possible yield of hay to the acre as though they had been at the business all their lives. I found Bellwattle with a fork, a spade, and buckets of disinfectant, cleaning out an old cart-horse stable that must have been left to look after itself for years. She pushed the hair off her face and looked up as my shadow fell across the floor.

"Hullo, A. H.!" said she, "what do you think of this? Manure's my element now."

But I am going on too far. I must first explain

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

how I came to be staying with them at Lemington at all, and staying with them alone. Clarissa had been called back to the West Indies. Her father had contracted a fatal and lingering illness. There was hope she might arrive in time to be with him, for they spoke of the possibility of his holding on for some time. It would have been the essence of selfishness to have refused the pathetic simplicity of his request. Again, there was her love of the sun. We were scarcely through the winter. February! It may fill the dykes with water in the country. It can fill the heart with gloom in town.

I could see the half-eager look in her eyes when she brought me her father's letter. She knew I could not go and made no request that she should go herself. All she said was this:

"I can see the room where he's lying. I'm so glad—it's full of sun."

I looked out of the window at the gathering fog that was plunging the streets in a weight of darkness. Her eyes followed mine, and turning, I found them wistfully and failingly trying to gaze beyond that shadow which, falling, be it only in your street, seems to roll a mighty stone against the very entrance to your heart.

It cannot quite have sealed the entrance to



"Manure's my element now."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

mine, for much as I knew I should be a lost soul now without her, I asked her would she like to go.

She stared at me, unbelieving for a moment, then suddenly her arms became tentacles about my neck, and she was whispering those things about me every man is content to hear, not so much because he even half-believes them to be true, as because another's whole-hearted belief in them makes the world an easier place to live in.

Thus it was I was parted from Clarissa for a while, and in that time, with Moxon to look after me, tried to fall back upon the old bachelor habits of former days as though it were a most natural mode of living.

Let no man think an experiment of this nature can be a success. Moxon gave notice twice, cancelling the first before he had left the room. The second notice was not cancelled until he had reached the hall door, when, happening to come out of my study, I saw him taking a last look round.

He fumbled for his bag directly he saw me, and then, solely I believe to force conversation, he made as though he had forgotten something.

"I hope you'll give my kind respects to Mrs. Bellairs, Sir," he said; "and say I was very reluctant to go, Sir."

The Shock Absorber

It was a matter either of pushing him out of the door for his unnecessary servility, or shutting it in his face for his obvious and pitiable remorse.

"I'm like a bear with a sore head, I suppose," said I.

"If I might say so, Sir," he replied, "I think you want a change."

To me that sounded confoundedly impudent, and I was just about to walk away without so much as saying good-bye to the man. I took the first step in that direction, and then realised it was confoundedly true. But I had no intention of showing my gratitude.

"I'll take a change," said I, "and you can go upstairs and unpack that bag."

Having made this concession to his pride, I walked through the baize door in the hall and swung it back none too gently after me.

He can take it or leave it at that, thought I to myself, and if the slam of that door does not express to him my feelings about the matter, he's too thick-skinned to waste any pity on.

The slam of the door would undoubtedly have had its effect, if only the door had slammed. But quite recently I had had a shock-absorber put on the beastly thing, and in response to my mood,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

it closed to with incredible deliberation, making an ironic hissing sound as it subsided.

That made me laugh. I had recovered my sense of humour, and next to a woman about the house, there is nothing like a sense of humour for running an establishment with success.

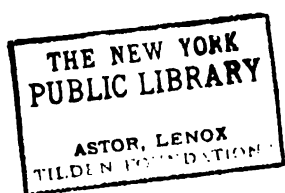
Give me laughter and I will go through the world with peas in my shoes, never finding it even so much as a pilgrimage. I am sure they laughed on their way to Canterbury, and if the records of Chaucer do not suggest it, it was because the really funny stories were unprintable.



Chapter VII
FITTING A MOOD



*"That was a trenchant
fancy of his, that picture
of Spring squeezing
through iron railings."*



CHAPTER VII

FITTING A MOOD



WHEN I said I would take a change I had neither Cruikshank nor Bellwattle in my mind. Visions of dreary mornings on the parade at Brighton reluctantly presented themselves to me and were dismissed. I could have got some fishing in Scotland. That was not without its summons. But it was not such a change as that I wanted. It was not sport.

There is a mood—common I suppose to everybody—when I want to gamble, to mix myself up in affairs where there is hazard and the sense of adventure. I had thought of Monte Carlo, but that was too literal a translation of my needs. As for a sense of adventure, in those overheated rooms, watching from one hour to another the turn of a card or the spin of a ball, there is none.

Then came a letter from Cruikshank whom I knew was in Gloucestershire, but of whose affairs,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

since he had left Ireland, I had heard nothing. He asked me to go to one of those shops in St. Martin's Lane and buy him a second-hand saddle. It was not this, so much as one paragraph in his letter which, as I read it, came with a jerk into my mind. Here it is and its suitability to my mood needs no comment.

"I've bought the farm attached to this place. One hundred and forty acres, and as I look out across the meadows from my bedroom windows, seeing my hedges and my trees, I feel as if I owned the whole of England. Farming is a life for a man. It's up against Nature from one day to the next—a hazard but more than a hazard. It's a terrific enterprise. Sometimes I feel like Columbus pointing out into the West with nothing but a compass and a stout heart.

"Why don't you and Clarissa come down here for a bit and give us a hand in our adventure? Bellwattle, I and a drunken old farm-hand are running this dairy farm, and I have never felt the responsibility of life so acutely or so engagingly before. It is the close contact with the land that does it. When I ride out every morning before breakfast to have a look round the fields, and see that none of the cattle have strayed overnight, then I feel like Moses receiving the tablets of stone from the hands of God,

Fitting a Hood

and my fifty head of cattle become a whole fifty tribes of Israel to me.

"You can well suppose that an occupation which at one moment makes you feel like Christopher Columbus, and the next like the leader of the tribes of Israel, is no idle business, and one well worth closer examination. Come down for a week, and if you don't like it, if you prefer your grimy plane trees and your unhappy crocuses in the park, if you would rather your Spring came to you, squeezing through iron railings than dancing down a Gloucestershire lane, there are always trains back to London. Bellwattle is working as she never worked before. She rises at half-past seven and feeds the calves as the milk comes in. I milk. Oh—I can tell you we are close to the fount of life here as never before.

"'Sheepskins for our men folk,'

"How is it old Izaak had it?

*"'Grey russet for our wives,
Heigh trollollie lollie loe
Heigh trollollie lee.*

*'Tis warmth and not gay clothing
That doth prolong our lives,
Then care away and wend along with me.'"*

What better suggestion could have fitted in

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

with my mood than that? I pondered over it on my way down to St. Martin's Lane and, by the time I had bought the saddle, had decided I would save the cost of postage and take the thing to Tewkesbury myself.

Cruikshank's reference to grimy plane trees and unhappy crocuses in the park if, at the moment of reading, it had wrought me to resentment, yet penetrated deeper than I imagined. I walked down the Row to have a look at them.

That was a trenchant fancy of his, that picture of Spring squeezing through iron railings. I could see little figures everywhere I looked; little figures soiling their frocks with London soot and tearing them as they scrambled between the iron palings, all eager to feel the touch of grass under their feet, yet determined, with clear shouts of laughter, not to be disappointed.

Whatever he might say from his pastures, I knew they were not disappointed. If in London, Spring does squeeze through the railings and the grass is spare it feels beneath its feet, there is space for laughter in the open places. However, the more I allowed my thoughts to run in defence of my London park, the more I thought of Cruikshank in his meadows; the more plainly did I see a creature with blowing hair, with apple cheeks and

Fitting a Mood

clean print frock come dancing down the lanes of Gloucestershire.

"Pack my things," I said to Moxon that evening. "I'm going down to Tewkesbury."

"I had an aunt living in Tewkesbury, Sir," said he. "She used to remark what a change it was to London."

By which I understood that Moxon approved of my decision since it was bringing me the dose he felt I needed.

"You might take a fortnight's holiday yourself," said I, for if there were any medicine to be taken, I was still of a mood and determined he should share the bottle with me.

He accepted my generosity in the spirit that it was meant; that is to say he made no further reference to his aunt.



Chapter VIII

MANURIAL VALUES

"I begin to feel it's incumbent upon me to be buried on my own farm."

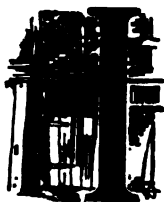


**THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

**ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS**

CHAPTER VIII

MANURIAL VALUES



HAVE already described how Bellwattle was cleaning out a cart-horse stable when I arrived.

"Cruikshank's down in the crooked withy meadow," said she, and began taking off her gloves.

"The crooked what?" I asked her.

"The crooked withy meadow. It's right down at the other end of the farm. It's all twisty and turny, that's why it's called crooked. Then there's a stream runs through it, and there are willows all along the banks. They call willows—withies—here. But then all the fields are named. They've been named for hundreds of years. We tread on history, you see, wherever we walk. There's an oak beam in that barn with the date 1651 on it. One of the diamond panes in the window in the hall has a name cut on with a diamond, and the date 1618. Can't you feel people everywhere? I can."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I glanced at her hands, begrimed even through the gloves, and I made a feeble joke.

"Aren't you losing your sense of touch with that sort of work?" I asked.

I knew it was a feeble joke because she took me quite seriously, and told me how filthy the stable had been before she tackled it.

They had only been in formal possession of the farm for a week or two at the time of my arrival, and were still in the midst of the process of clearing up after Sniff. That stable had to be cleaned, she said, before any animal could be invited to live in it.

"It hasn't," she said, "been cleaned for years."

I suggested that other horses had lived there apparently with success.

"Well, my horses aren't going to," she retorted, and I was irresistibly reminded of big Claus and little Claus, only that her vanity was the vanity of a big



*Let come, long time
she suggested*

heart, whilst the vanity of little Claus was purely that of a modern tradesman with a big purse.

She gave me a well-manured fork to carry in one hand and a bucket of disinfectant in the other.

"Let's come and have tea," she suggested, and with the enthusiasm of one who by her labours has earned for herself a hearty appetite.

Through a large, cool dairy and a lofty scullery where everything was whitewashed even to the beams, I followed her, ruminating, to a cheerful meal set out in the kitchen.

This was the first introduction of my mind to the life of farming. I had already received a new conception—a new conception of dirt. For



Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Bellwattle, who is as daintily-minded as you must expect any woman to be, to turn thus directly and enthusiastically to thoughts of tea from the cleaning out of manure in a cart-horse stable, was a revelation to me.

"Do you really feel an appetite after that job?" I asked.

In the act of washing her hands under a tap in the scullery, she turned to me with wide surprise.

"Why not?" she exclaimed; "It's quite clean dirt."

Then I began to realise what Cruikshank meant in his letter when he said, "It's the close contact with the land that does it." Indeed, as he explained to me that evening while we sat talking over a fire blazing with logs of apple wood, you come to regard life in its true elements when once you take to farming.

"Everything," said he, "has its manurial value. The man who starves his cattle starves his land. I begin to feel it's incumbent upon me to be buried on my own farm in order to justify my existence to the last. We must give back to the land. Beasts and men, we must all give back. These crematoria seem to me now to be just typical of the increasing selfishness of the age. No one gives back. We all take and take and take from

the soil, and when our hands touch it, we call it dirt. This horror of being buried in unsanctified ground is no more than a commentary upon the trade that has crept into the spirit of the church. What's it matter if the blade of a plough does drive through your skull a hundred years hence? You'll have done more for the land that bred you than by keeping your ashes in a crematorial urn."

This was quite typical of Cruikshank's extravagance of speech. In such a strain as this he used to talk of his garden in Ireland. I nevertheless had my first glimmering of the truth of what he said when, that afternoon, Bellwattle sat down with me to tea in the kitchen.

It was a wonderful room, that kitchen; low-ceilinged, with great, massive oak beams running across it, with strange, unexpected cupboards and uneven stone-paved floor, with diamond-paned mullioned windows looking over the garden on one side and across the yard at the other.

Many were the meals I had in that kitchen before I returned to London. There was there indeed, as Bellwattle had said, the feeling of people everywhere; of all the farm-hands that had come and gone in the centuries during which it had provided meals for eager appetites; no less than the talk that had passed over the wood fires

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

in the open grate that now was filled in with a kitchen range.

Hooks were still embedded in the beams where the flitches of bacon once had hung. There was still the rack over the fireplace on which the farmer's gun had rested. From some antique dealer's, Cruikshank had brought an old elm high-backed settle that stood with a wide curve by the fire, and made a little room in itself of the space of which once was around the chimney corner.

It was at that tea I first tasted their butter, their cream and their eggs.

I need no better surroundings than this to feel myself at ease with all the world. A Hepplewhite chair of the finest design may bring back the flower of the Georgian period, but a high-backed settle by a kitchen fire savours of the good old oak.

"You'd better have eggs," said Bellwattle; "You won't get anything more till after eight."

I said I would have one, and there being an unlimited supply apparently, when that was finished, I had another. We ate bread they had baked, and cakes their woman had made. I call her a woman with Bellwattle's permission. She had no desire, so Bellwattle said, to be called a cook. I have seen her weeding in Cruikshank's

Manorial Values

mangold patch. I have seen her working in the hayfield. It would obviously be ridiculous to call her a cook. She was just a woman in a world where men and women it would seem can afford to be themselves.

And then, while I was realising the incomparability of what is called good wholesome food, Bellwattle told me of Cruikshank's visit to Tewkesbury market when he set out to buy his first cow.

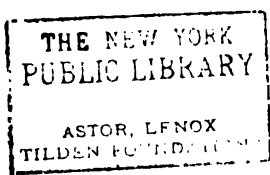


Chapter IX

CRUIKSHANK IN THE MARKET



*"Cruikshank set out on
his first venture to the
public market."*



CHAPTER IX

CRUIKSHANK IN THE MARKET



WHEN our greetings were over; when Cruikshank had conjured the disappearance of three large cups of tea and many thick slices of bread and butter, talking agricultural jargon all the time, I was told the story of the purchase of their first beast—the first cow—the first contribution towards that ideal herd of which Cruikshank had visions in his heart as being the best in the country-side.

It was told in all seriousness by Cruikshank, who, when anything amusing happened to him in the midst of the vital affairs of life, needed a considerable passage of time before he saw the humour of it.

It is possible that when at length he did appreciate the funny side of it, he really saw more fun than anyone else. It is even possible he may have realised it at the moment, but the sweat of reality

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

was too heavily on his brow when he was occupied with the intensity of life to allow him ease for laughter.

Bellwattle on the other hand needs no more than half an eye for the humour of all that happens in a comical existence. She has all the old-world comedian's sense of the ridiculousness of a situation, and could sit by accident on a new hat or spoil a new frock by some contortionate mishap on a muddy day, provoking herself thereby to shouts of the most wholehearted laughter I have ever heard.

It would be superfluous to comment upon the invaluable quality of such a mind as this. I have known it save a thousand situations from approaching tragedy. In an impending breach of their happiness, I have seen Cruikshank take out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat of reality from his forehead, and have my own suspicions that the movement was as much to conceal a laugh.

At the conclusion of a row between husband and wife, the man never laughs. It has been too serious a business. He may come across to his wife saying, "Poor old thing," as he kisses her on the back of her neck. But that is all. I doubt if the gods themselves have that sharpness of sight to witness the smile which trickles down inside her

Cruikshank in the Market

blouse. Possibly she feels it on the bare skin of her shoulders; but a wise woman vouchsafes none of these secrets to any but herself.

The cow, however. He bought it in Tewkesbury market. It was during that period of interregnum, between their first occupation of Lemington Court and the appropriation of the farm that Cruikshank had decided to begin dairy farming in a small way.

As soon as that thatching of the shed in their orchard was completed, as soon as skimming pans, churn and rolling-board were purchased and placed in readiness in that cool and spotless dairy Cruikshank set out on his first venture to the public market.

I have a vivid picture of that occasion in my mind. From what they told me that afternoon, I can fancy him, armed with his blackthorn stick and in his oldest clothes, seeing himself with intense seriousness and feeling he was about to take a momentous step in his life.

He departed with the good wishes of the whole household. Even their woman I think, together with Puddimore, the old and bibulous farm-hand, came out to see him off. Bellwattle stood in the road and waved her hand to him, and once or twice he turned, when, with a certain amount of

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

condescension, he waved back to her, as though he were thinking to himself—"Poor little woman, she's quite excited about it—" And really there was no one more excited in the whole of Gloucestershire that morning than he.

"I'm going into the market this morning to buy a cow," he said to the first person he knew.

"I'm going to start my own dairy for the house before I take over the farm," he said to the next; "As a matter-of-fact, I'm going into the market to buy a cow."

"Is it wise," I inquired, when I heard of this childlike frankness on his part—"Is it wise to let everyone know of your intentions when you are going into the public market?"

He looked at me sharply as one who admires another for his unexpected sagacity.

"You're a shrewd fella, A. H.," said he. "I was a damned fool, but not such a fool as I seemed to them. I'd been studying the prices pretty closely, and I knew what I was going to give to a penny for a good milch cow with calf. They might try, as indeed they did, but they couldn't put me up a farthing beyond that."

The only question as far as I could see, was whether he knew a good milch cow from a bad one. It seemed a serious matter to me in a pur-

Cruikshank in the Market

chase of this nature. Very tentatively, I inquired where he had got his experience.

"He'd none," said Bellwattle.

"I don't know about none," Cruikshank retorted. "I'd seen a bit of farming in Ireland."

"You know you hadn't seen any worth speaking about," insisted Bellwattle. "You believe in the *flair* for a thing. I remember your saying it at the time. You believe in the *flair*, just as you do about houses and furniture."

"Can you have a *flair* about a cow?" I inquired.

"Cruikshank," said she, "can have a *flair* about anything."

We left the matter of experience at that, for Cruikshank apparently was satisfied with this exposure of his methods. Apparently when a man has a *flair*, his prime *flair* is for himself. On the face of it, it sounds conceited and objectionable, but I have always found it one of the most delightful and ingenuous traits in the character of Cruikshank, and would not disturb it for the world. By the tone in her voice as she spoke of it, I am sure Bellwattle is of this same opinion too.

He was quite ready to realise he had been somewhat of a fool in the generosity of his confidence, but apparently he did his best to make up for it. He was intensely secretive about his bidding.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Before the market opened, he button-holed the agent who was also one of the auctioneers in the Tewkesbury market and gave him implicit instructions as to how he was going to make his bids.

"When you see me scratch the side of my nose," Cruikshank had told him—and he gave a graphic illustration of the movement—"take that as a bid. I know all these fellows think that when a chap like myself takes to farming he's a hopeless mug, and deserves to be fleeced at every possible opportunity."

In this, I have no doubt, Cruikshank was quite right. A gentleman farmer and an amateur at that must run the gauntlet. He is like a bone-setter, setting up in practice in Harley Street, and must take all he gets from the legitimate profession.

The only credentials acceptable on the land are to be found in the parish churchyard. If you can point to the gravestones of three generations standing up proudly in the green grass, there is respect for you. Farming is, or was, a conservative business. The land, indeed, bred a whole nation of conservatives in the good old days. But trade and machinery have altered all that.

Machinery gives nothing back. It consumes. In this respect the conservatives were always more liberal than their political opponents. At

Cruikshank in the Market

least they gave back to the land what they took out of it. A dealer does not feed his beasts. He sells them. Thus he takes his profit from the land, but the devil a bit does he give back. It is all a question of what Cruikshank would call manorial values. If England is stale—though God forbid it—it is because civilisation has turned to selfishness, because the farmer has turned dealer and become a liberal, and the whole land is starved.

Quite conscious of this lack of credentials of the land, Cruikshank took cunning precautions against the inevitable penalties. I don't know what the auctioneer must have thought of him behind a benign exterior. By all accounts he was genuinely sympathetic. Cruikshank scratched his nose three times in separate pantomime lest there might be any mistake about it, and then he went into the market, forearmed against every conceivable trick that might be played upon him. As, however, he had told everybody he was going to buy a cow, I can quite understand the subsequent result.

And all this time, Bellwattle was waiting with eagerness and patience at home for his return.

He went into the market. I can picture him, happy and good-natured with all the world, having a smile for everyone except the dealers.

Seeing the auctioneer's brother selling chickens

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

at the far end of the market, he nodded affably to him as he passed, and found himself the possessor of a crate—not to be taken away—of six emaciated blue Andalusians, when, not liking to admit he had acquired them only by way of “Good-morning,” they were sent back to Lemington later in the day.

“The charge for cartage,” said he, “was quite normal. But after that, I daren’t look at the auctioneer, or if I did, I had to put on a sort of woebegone expression, as though I never wanted to bid for anything again.”

“And all the time,” interposed Bellwattle, “there was I going out on to the road the moment I heard the sound of a cow mooing, expecting to see him driving a huge beast in triumph down the road.”

“Well—get on with the story,” said I, for by some subtle progression my interest was increasing. I had seen a look in the depth of Bellwattle’s brown eyes. I knew the best was yet to come.



Chapter X
THE ULTIMATE PURCHASE

*"He'd got a box
under his arm—
a little box."*



**THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

**ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION**

CHAPTER X

THE ULTIMATE PURCHASE



HE news having circulated the market that Cruikshank was there with the intention of buying a cow, it appears there was scarcely a farmer that day who had not got [the very cow he wanted, then at the moment grazing in his fields.

One by one they came up to him with the air of confidential acquaintance, though many of them he had never seen before, offering to help him to the right side of a bargain.

"It was as if," said Cruikshank—"it was as if I were a man in the direst of dilemmas, and the world had suddenly become full of philanthropists ready to do me a turn. One after another they took me by the elbow and led me away into a corner, talking in undertones about this amazing cow of theirs that gave anything from three to five gallons of milk a day, had never had more than two calves, and for which they had paid

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

nothing less than thirty pounds, generally by private purchase. One man showed me a receipt for thirty-three pounds, and when I told him it was not substantial evidence he had paid it for the cow he wanted to sell me, he looked at me as though I were certainly no farmer, and from all he could gather as little of a gentleman too."

"You bought your cow in the open market?" said I. "Well, you ought to do all right. Go on."

"I bid for her in the open market," he replied and, looking at Bellwattle, again I caught that look in the iris of her eye.

"Yes, he bid for it," she prompted.

"I bid for it," he repeated, "but they were all out to catch me. Every time I scratched my nose and the price rose, it rose again immediately from some other quarter. Of course, bidding at an auction's an exciting job. It always makes my heart beat nineteen to the dozen. I went over the price I'd intended to once or twice, but they thought they'd got a real mug, and up it went again, and all to make just a few more shillings than the beast was worth. I'd never thought of the value of ten shillings so much in all my life. One chap I caught at it, winking to the auctioneer. He didn't know I'd seen him, so I ran him up and then left him with his own beast."

The Ultimate Purchase

"I wonder how many miles he had to drive the creature home," said Bellwattle, who I am sure will wonder that every time the story is told.

"I wouldn't have minded if it had been twenty," replied Cruikshank when, catching the look of pained astonishment in her face, he added, "except so far as the poor beast was concerned."

That deducted a few miles from the hypothetical journey the cow had had to make. Her expression relaxed somewhat, but a good ten miles remained in her imagination. I could see her following it along the road well into the falling of the night when footsore and weary with the blows from the stick of the exasperated farmer, it was driven into a shed not fit for any animal to sleep in.

If ever a soul is crucified in mind, it is the soul of Bellwattle when she hears of an animal in distress.

"What's the matter with it?" is her first whispered ejaculation when she sees a bird or an animal in unexpected repose. When in response to her furtive approach to help it, the bird flies or the animal calmly walks away, her exclamation is always one of relief, and never of exasperation. No creature on four or two legs can exhaust her patience, and amidst all this unbounded affection,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I sometimes think she has dissipated her love for children. Why is it she has never had one? Is childbearing not quite so automatic a process as we suppose? Is there necessary some quality in a woman's mind as well as the health of her body?

What idle speculations in the midst of the engaging story of Cruikshank's first purchase in the open market!

"What did you have to pay for the cow in the end?" I asked, "and was she a really good milch cow when you got her?"

"I never got one at all," said Cruikshank. "Every time they ran the prices up too high."

"Do you mean to say with Bellwattle waiting there at home, you came back empty-handed?" I exclaimed.

"Not empty-handed," said she quickly with again that tremor in her eyes. "I was out on the road looking for him when I saw him turn the corner. He'd got a box under his arm—a little box."

I looked from one to the other. Bellwattle's nostrils were distended with laughter, and Cruikshank was busy cutting himself another big slice of bread.

"A little box!" I echoed.

"Yes," said she, "a little box. There was a



"'I bid for it,' he repeated, 'but they were well out to catch me. Every time I scratched my nose and the price rose, it rose again immediately from some other quarter.'"

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

man in the market who had a ferret that was worth one and six, and Cruikshank bought it for half-a-crown."

"I didn't know what ferrets were worth," muttered Cruikshank.

"He went into the market to buy a cow," said Bellwattle.

"And he came back," said I, "with a——"

"Yes—but wait a minute—wait a minute!" she interposed. "He didn't like feeding the ferret because it was the very devil to bite—the creature! So I fed it and then one day it escaped and killed four of the blue Andalusians, and then he sold it back to the man he'd bought it from for one and threepence."

By that time I was rolling about on my chair, and Cruikshank, saving himself from the indignity of laughter, was thrusting large pieces of bread-and-butter into his mouth.

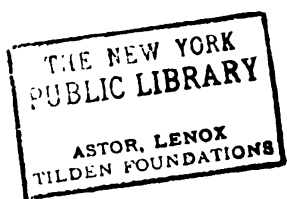
As for Bellwattle, there was now a wild and unrestrained look in her eye, and the tears were coursing in streams down her cheeks.





Chapter XI
THE
CREAKING HINGE

*" 'Beg pardon, sorr,'
he said, 'I didn't know
no one were here.' "*



CHAPTER XI

THE CREAKING HINGE



O I came to the beginning of my peaceful adventure at Lemington Court. I am sure Moxon's aunt never found so much change in Tewkesbury as I did there in that one street village, where the red-tiled church on one side and the Vicarage on the other, together with the blacksmith's forge at the corner made the very hub of our daily life. There, of a day, might pass no fewer than four farm wagons, not to speak of the herd of milking cows from Savage's farm, sometimes an occasional flock of sheep on their way to a change of pasture. I have seen two farmers' traps collected at the corner by the forge, while a queue of as many as three horses would be waiting outside to be shod.

Yet in all the time I was there with Cruikshank and Bellwattle, I never saw a policeman directing the traffic. The nearest policeman lived almost

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

three miles away, in a little house at the cross roads. He had a passion for his garden, and the sign—Police Station—was nearly obliterated on his house by a mass of rambling roses.

I retired to sleep that night in a huge four-post bed. It stood in the middle of an oak-beamed room, that boasted of oak-mullioned windows and diamond window-panes, one pane of which was missing, so that I had to secure myself against the draught with a wad of brown paper. Before I retired, however, I had pledged myself to stay and help them in their labours until Clarissa returned.

This meant a visit of at least three months, and when the next morning I was, so to speak, introduced to their farm-hand—Puddimore—I was not surprised they were glad of my assistance.

Puddimore was a character with the likeable qualities that all characters have and with many of those failings so few characters are without. I shall have much to say of him in these pages. Without him, the record of this gentlemanly farming would be wantonly incomplete.

He stood there that morning outside the cow-sheds where Cruikshank presented him to me, leaning on his blackthorn stick, his cap lurching

The Creaking Hinge

over one eye, his gaiters stained with dirt, his long, white linen coat an indescribable tone of yellow, and his eye winked at me, it seemed, as he touched his forehead.

I say the tone of Puddimore's coat was indescribable. It was not. *Isabelle* is the word, and for those who do not know what *Isabelle* may be, I must leave my story for an instant to take care of itself.

In the reign of Philip, which was in the days when our Elizabeth was on the throne, the Austrian Army, at war I suppose it was with France, besieged the town of Ostend.

At the beginning of the siege, the Princess Isabelle, imbued with the certainty of her father's success of arms, took an oath she would not change her body linen until the town had been taken.

Seeing that Queen Elizabeth when she died left but one change of body linen amongst all her countless dresses, this perhaps was not so rash an oath as it might seem. With the characteristic optimism of all who wage war, she probably expected the siege to last for three months. There is no suggestion in the story that the little Princess intended to inconvenience herself in any way.

The siege began in 1601, and one must assume that she started, so to speak, with a clean slate.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Three months went by, and no doubt when the *blanchisseuse* began to get hopeful of a little bit of work, she was told there would soon be something for her to do.

Six months went by—a year and then another. I picture the *blanchisseuse* on the verge of starvation, and the little Princess in tears. In three years' time the inhabitants of Ostend capitulated, for, having heard of the Princess Isabelle's oath, they no doubt succumbed to a sense of decency and nice feeling. There is a limit to which you can expect a nice-minded Princess to endure, and the inhabitants of Ostend have always been considerate to all womenkind. It would not be exaggeration to say all kinds of women.

But the *blanchisseuse* had died—and what remained of the little Princess's body linen was handed down to posterity in the name of a colour—the colour of buff, a light grey brown—which to this day in France is called—*Isabelle*.

The only one I feel any pity for was the *blanchisseuse*.

It was this—*Isabelle*—which was the colour of Puddimore's coat.

"He's a fine genklemung," he said to me when Cruikshank was out of hearing, "An' I know a fine genklemung when I see 'un."

The Creaking Hinge

I felt it was intended I should repeat this to Cruikshank, who, when I did, regarded it in its worst aspect.

"It means I'm no farmer," said he; "Puddimore has no respect for fine gentlemen—none of them have. As far as that goes, neither have I. There are plenty of fine gentlemen. The land could do with a few less. It's farmers it wants. Had he said I was a good farmer I'd have raised his wages."

"By the way, what are his wages?" I inquired.

He smiled—awkwardly, I thought. Bellwattle was present when I put that question, and he looked at her.

"Yes, I think you ought to pay him," said she; for Bellwattle would pay everyone in excess of their due, and is the most hopeless person I have ever met for giving tips. Again and again have I asked her, "Why do you pay a man for doing his work for which he has a regular wage?" To which she usually makes the same reply—"He was so nice about it."

Which is a commentary in its way upon most women. It is not so much what you do for them as the being nice about it which touches their hearts, and if some husbands learnt this by rote,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

they might get more of the tips and perquisites of married life.

"I think you really ought to pay him something," she repeated, and then I looked round at Cruikshank in astonishment.

"Does he get no wages at all?" I asked, wondering how this treatment coincided with his opinion of his master.

"Oh! he gets wages in kind," replied Cruikshank. "He was on the farm here before I came. I pay him the same way as Sniff did. He gets all his food and drink, his clothes, his tobacco and all the necessaries of life. And he sleeps over at the farmhouse. It's no good giving him any money. Money's no use to him. On the contrary money is poison in his throat."

"Poison!" I echoed.

"Yes, poison. Come and have a glass of cider," said he. "We have jolly good cider here. Not your bottled, syrup-py stuff, with gas in it that parades in the guise of champagne. You'll find it a bit rough at first, but wait till we come to the haymaking; you'll recognise it as a real drink then."

We took glasses and went out to the cider store where a huge cask lay alone in its splendour. Cruikshank took his keys out of his pocket and

The Creaking Hinge

rattled them loudly before he fitted the key in the padlock. He looked at me, and I looked at him. It was as though the action were some part of a mystic ceremony into which I felt it premature to inquire.

In silence we went into the store. In silence, Cruikshank drew the trickling stream of pale yellow liquid out of the cask and then, just as we were raising our glasses to our lips, the figure of Puddimore appeared at the entrance.

"Beg pargon, surr," he said, "I didn't know no-one were here, an' the door been open seemed wrong somehow."

"No; it's all right, Puddimore," said Cruikshank, and with the greatest solemnity he drew a third glass out of his pocket. "Have a drop of cider?"

"Well, surr," Puddimore began, but he came no further in his explanations as to why he might or might not like a drop. A glass was thrust into his hands and he raised it without hesitation to his lips. I watched it pouring down his old throat as he tilted his head back. Never a swallow, never an expansion or contraction of his muscles. It was like tipping the contents of a bucket into a well.

Sweeping his mouth with the back of his hand,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

he passed the glass back to Cruikshank, lingered a sanguine moment and then, muttering his thanks was gone.

"Do you always jangle the keys?" I asked.

"It's not necessary," said he, "that old door creaks on its hinge; I must have it oiled."



Chapter XII

THE MÊLÉE



"Bellwattle cursed and shouted at them. You could without exaggeration hear her feeding the calves all over the farm."

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XII

THE MÊLÉE



ALL previous records of Bellwattle have revealed her rather in her resemblance to Mrs. Malaprop than in the essential characteristics of her sex. She was a Mrs. Malaprop of words, as when I heard her once gently singing to herself.

“Bid me to live and I will live
Thy prostitute to be——”

“Thy what?” said I.

She repeated the opprobrious word and her expression wore the innocence of a child.

“Thy Protestant,” I corrected her and I kept my face straight.

“Well, what on earth does that mean?” she exclaimed; “Why not Roman Catholic or Presbyterian? Even then it has no sense. You can understand the other.”

As I say, she was a Mrs. Malaprop of words,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

but no less was she a Mrs. Malaprop in most of her reasoning, her arguments, in fact nearly all of the mental exercises in which she engaged herself.

Her argument as to the sanity of Euclid may be remembered. Her appreciation of that sanity when to her own satisfaction she discovered he was a maker of triangles for use in brass bands could not well be omitted from the remembrance. As a mental effort it was distinctly Malapropian, and as such I have every reason to suppose she will be recalled by those who have had account of her elsewhere.

But looking back upon those three months at Lemington, it is not so much in her Malaprop vein that I have a picture of her, but as of a woman with deep emotions where her mental processes were not concerned, with about the bravest heart I ever knew, and with an infinite sense of pure and natural philosophy.

That brave heart and those deep emotions will become evident as this chronicle progresses, for I find in review of it all, that every incident in the life of that farm led up to the little tragedy with which these pages close. It is not one of those remorseless tragedies. It does not wring the heart or make life fearsome and the less worth living. It is the tragedy of two stout hearts, and if any

suspicion of moisture has found its way into my eyes about it, at least it has not overflowed. I have even scarcely noticed it.

The very next morning, rising betimes for me, I was to see Bellwattle in full display of those maternal instincts which, elsewhere in these pages, I have said she seemed to reserve entirely for animals.

She called me to help her feed the calves.

"It's the very deuce of a business," said she; "they're little devils—you never saw such little devils."

I certainly never did, and had I myself been responsible for their welfare, there would have been many a sore snout or a thick ear, or whatever you do to a calf to induce it to behave itself. I should have lost patience.

It was not so with Bellwattle. Truly her language was terrible. I have never heard a woman use such language, and the tone of her voice was that of unmitigated rage, yet never once did she lay a hand on one single calf to hurt it.

Indeed I think she loved them all the better for their behaviour. She loves a cat that can steal and, in her charge, I have never seen a cat that could not. She adores a dog when he has

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

the wit and the sharpness to purloin the best part of the Sunday dinner. In her heart, I believe she thinks him no end of a hero to have outwitted his master, though, of course, before Cruikshank in his just rage at such a catastrophe, she is wisely silent, concealing all her glee behind a solemn expression of disapproval.

However, even Cruikshank, who thinks he can train a dog, she must somehow have won round to her way of thinking, for there is a homely verse about Dandy and another dog—Dicky—which has found its way into the annals of that family. I believe there are verses of the kind to be found in every household. Usually they are sung to what might be called doggerel tunes and in this instance I suspect Cruikshank of authorship. Bellwattle is as incapable of an effort in verse as any healthy-minded woman I have ever come across.

The stanza runs—

“I stole the mutton bone I did,
I stole the mutton bone;
I took it 'neath the table, and I eat it all alone,
And Dicky never had a bit
Not e'er a bit had he,
I stole the mutton bone I did, and had it for my
tea.”

The Milt

Of course, it is the most hopeless drivel, but sung, as they sing it to Dandy with emphatic braggadocio to the tune of *Marching through Georgia*, it gains greatly in meaning and purpose. Possibly Dandy himself aids in this illusion, for he sits there listening with an attentive ear and an expression on his face as though they were pinning medals to his chest.

That Cruikshank is the author, leads me to suppose that, in those quiet moments all wives can have with their husbands if they chose, Bellwattle has cajoled him into her way of thinking. I am hanged if I would give way, but then I do not know Bellwattle in her quiet moments, and am probably talking right out of my hat.

If I had any sympathy with those calves that morning, it was a forced and unnatural virtue. They butted, they kicked, they spilt more milk than ever they consumed, and they were the greediest little devils I have ever come across in my life.

There were ten of them, all in one big stable and, for the convenience of feeding, the place was divided by partitions into three stalls. Some calves were older than others. They required different nourishment; they could take the less of pure milk and needed the more of calf-meal.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

This was part of my duty that morning, mixing the calf-meal in a bucket with skim milk.

But even with the partitions in that stable, the job was an arduous one. While one was being fed, the others with a strength and persistence that was amazing, would come thrusting their noses round all possible corners to get at the pail. Bellwattle cursed and shouted at them. You could without exaggeration hear her feeding the calves all over the farm.

Every little beast had a name, and had you not known they were calves, at a distance you might have believed yourself in the vicinity of a national school, conducted by a mistress with a vile temper and composed of the most unruly little brats it would be possible to find in a day's march.

They pushed their noses in between her arms. They wormed their way into the corner where she had isolated the little beast whose turn it was to be fed. And finally, one of them, sharper of wit than the rest, thrust his head between her legs and lifted her clean off her feet, when the contents of the bucket were spilled all over the stable floor.

I cannot remember the names she called him, for her back was aching fit to break by this, and the air was so full of noises that it is even possible I did not hear. But I believe by that method of

attack, he found a place deeper in her heart than any of the rest of them.

I came away with the empty buckets from that *mêleé*, exhausted and convinced that there is no bottom to the depths of Bellwattle's heart where young things are concerned; that there is no limit to her patience.

I almost believe she could bring up a nestful of young wrens to maturity from the first moment they emerged from their eggs. But I have my grave doubts as to what sort of place the world would be if all its creatures had been mothered by Bellwattle. We should be a thieving, dishonest lot, living mostly for our stomachs and dying in thousands by early middle age of a fatty degeneration for which no one would have the energy to find a cure.

One virtue, however, I am certain we should have.

We should all adore Bellwattle and even in the gasping moments of death would give her our blessing.



Chapter XIII

BEYOND THE FIELD'S EDGE

*"With the sight in
his mind, he yet
may look beyond
the field's edge to
the bell of wood."*



THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XIII

BEYOND THE FIELD'S EDGE



WAS about to say it was strange
—it was not strange—probably
it was the most natural thing
that could have happened for
Cruikshank and me that even-
ing to find ourselves talking of

the maternal instinct, and sooner or later associating it with the name of Bellwattle.

I had described for him my efforts and experiences over the feeding of the calves as we sat after supper in the little room that was his study and office combined. In her white, Queen Anne panelled room with a crackling fire of applewood, Bellwattle was mending socks and talking, I have no doubt to herself, smoking her innumerable cigarettes and deeply inhaling with that comic expression she has, like a fish gasping out of water.

We had left her there to her darning, though there are few things she likes better than to sit at her sewing and hear men talk. In these ways

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

she gathers her quaint stores of knowledge. I catch a look in her eye sometimes on these occasions, the look of a squirrel hurrying home with a nut. It is an odd way to learn, but now that I have a daughter myself and catechise her every holiday when she comes home from school, I strongly suspect it is the backbone of many a woman's education.

What a lot of nonsense they must acquire!

This evening, Bellwattle looked up sharply as we went to the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked quickly.

We intimated it was to the study, well knowing we were like two dogs slinking away to their manger.

"Can't you talk here?" she asked.

"We could," said I, and I wanted to be wholehearted about it but felt there was in my tone the confession that there are moments when men want to talk to men, and the dearest woman in the world is in the way. I had not seen Cruikshank since I was married. Many things had happened. I suppose he was feeling the same.

"Well, I just wanted to show you those plans of the land," he said lamely, "then we'll come back."

She looked at both of us and I dare swear she

Beyond the Field's Edge

knew better what we were going to talk about than we did ourselves. So many women would have thrown that instinctive knowledge in our faces and made a plaint out of the situation. I wonder did Cruikshank realise what an exceptional wife he has when she said—

"Yes—show him the plans—I'll be here when you come back if you are not too long."

I know of those who would complain that that is not a good instance to record, because it is so unlike life. To these I would retort that their fortunes, if they have any, are not those of Cruikshank. It is sufficient for me that what happens is real enough, and is a matter of no consequence whether I am believed or not in the telling of it.

"So you helped feed the calves," were the first words he said to me when we were seated and had our pipes alight.

"I'm not thinking of the calves," said I; "they exhaust all thought. If the rest of farming is like that, it's a strenuous life. I'm not thinking about the calves. I'm thinking about Bellwattle."

He took a penknife out of his pocket and with gentle taps he rammed down the ashes in his pipe. It meant the thing had started well, and he was going to enjoy it down to the last ember.

"What about her?" he asked.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I am sure he knew well enough what I was going to say, but men it would seem in their conversations hold themselves and others in suspicion at the first sign of intuition.

One woman to another would reply, "I know what you're going to say," and from that instant all preliminaries would be negotiated. Such a remark as that from one woman to another would be the intimation of a close sympathy of understanding. Had Cruikshank replied in that manner to me, doubtless I should have resented it, regarding the assumption on his part as little short of conceit.

"What about her?" he asked blandly and that, between men, was just the sort of reply that I required. Straight away I let go what was in my mind. Had he not wanted to hear it, he would never have replied as he did.

"Seven years haven't you been married?" said I.

He nodded his head and then allowed something to go wrong with his pipe, for he stood up, so that his back was turned to me and fiddled about with a feather, thrusting it into the stem. Again, between women, this would have been an intimation that enough had been said. Between us, it was that he was quite ready to hear

Beyond the Field's Edge

all I had to say, but was not prepared to show me what he felt about it.

I took the courage of a great friendship in both hands.

"It's damned impertinent," said I; "but why haven't you had any children?"

"Is this the outcome of helping to feed the calves?" he asked, and, by the way he persisted in fiddling with that feather in a pipe any man would have known was burning well, I knew he was making to gain time.

"Well, it is if you like," I replied. "I've often thought it before. But this morning—one of those calves is being weaned—she fed it with her fingers, shoving them in its mouth, and inducing it to suck with its nose in the milk, till it began sucking the milk of its own accord. Nearly half an hour she stuck at it with her back bent over that bucket. Directly she took her fingers out of the milk, the little beast would follow her hand. Back it would go in the milk again. Back would go his nose after it. He'd eat the milk as long as her fingers were there, but I'm damned if he'd drink it. She showed me her fingers after half an hour of that, and they were all sore and red where he'd been munching them. After about twenty minutes, I told her I'd let the little brute starve,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

and then she looked up at me—just one look. Why hasn't she got any children, old man? Is there anything wrong?"

With his back still turned, he began filling a fresh pipe.

"I know that look," said he.

"Of course you know it," I retorted testily. He was dodging me. "But if my question is damned impertinent, why don't you say so?"

He lit his pipe, pressing down the burning tobacco four separate times before he answered my question. Then he turned and I could see his face. There was a glow in it. I can describe it by no other word. He was looking as a man might look who had caught a glimpse beyond the veil of earthly things. I have seen that look sometimes in women's faces—seldom in a man's.

For women, in their bodies, can reach across the gulf and with their fingers touch the infinite. Nature has chosen them to be the spring from which wells the stream of life. Their touch is an actual touch with the quick and with the dead, with the life that was and is and is to be. The first movement, the first awakening as when the seed first answers to the warmth of the soil, is permitted to their secret consciousness. All that a

Beyond the Field's Edge

man knows and sees are the wide stretches of the barren earth where the plough has cut its furrows.

With the sight in his mind, he yet may look beyond the field's edge to the belt of wood; beyond that sometimes to the far hills, but seldom can his sight reach the plain beyond once more where the river runs to join the distant sea.

Yet the look in Cruikshank's eye at that moment had this illimitable distance I have so seldom seen. Watching him then, he appeared to me as one who had been admitted to some secret knowledge; as though he knew things some of which he could not tell, not even to himself.

Firmly I do believe there is a state of mind, a condition of vision, when one knows far more than one can speak. Words have no relation to it.

I should not expect a man who had seen God to be able to tell me what he saw. I should not expect him to know himself. Words are only the language of the things we do and feel. There are states of mind in which words have no place at all. No vocabulary has been contrived to fit them. They only become faintly intelligible to ourselves when we have not a single thought in the upper consciousness of our minds.

Such a condition I found myself aware of in Cruikshank when I saw that look in his eyes.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Such a condition I was convinced of when I heard his reply.

"As a matter-of-fact," said he slowly, "just four days ago, she told me she was going to have a baby."

He took up the poker as if it were a sword, and struck it into the heart of the fire as though he were administering the death thrust to the most relentless enemy of his soul.

"I can't believe it yet," he said, and he thrust again, by which action it was plain to be seen how much he did believe and how much already he was prepared to fight for its existence against the countless odds of life.

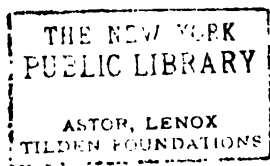


Chapter XIV

THE GLIMMERING OF COMMONSENSE

*"But were commonsense
the virtue some demand
for it, the story of Jack
the Giant-killer would
never have been written."*





CHAPTER XIV

THE GLIMMERING OF COMMONSENSE



HAVE so many pictures, so many memories of those days at Lemington Court in my thoughts that I must pick and choose and cannot make up my mind where to begin.

One might divide a day of a good twelve hours into the labour of those things which must be done and those things which have need of doing. The cows must be milked, but there is only a need for the mending of hedges. The calves must be fed, the pigs and the chickens, but there is only a need for the manure to be cleared out of the farmyard and taken away in the muck cart to the meadows which that year are going to be put down for hay.

Between one thing and another the work is endless. For the first time in my life, I appreciated the meaning of the Sabbath rest. For the first time in my life, I distinguished a peaceful note in a church bell, hearing, even in the dissonorous

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

jangle of that in Lemington, a welcome release, rather than the suggestion I get in London, a suggestion of the prelude to the town-crier's voice advertising the wares of religion.

The Sabbath indeed was a peaceful day on the farm. Certainly there were still the inevitable duties that had to be done. Calves do not languish in their appetites because God appointed for Himself a day of rest. But once these duties were fulfilled, one might dispense with the things that needed doing and keep a clear conscience; one could do a little work in the kitchen-garden, or lean over the pigsty, chewing a straw and watch the pigs fattening for the market. Sometimes the three of us would walk round the fields together, inspecting the cattle grazing, the milking cows in one meadow, the calves that had passed out of Bellwattle's hands in another.

This last Sabbath occupation was one that had immense pleasure for her. There were her children, boys and girls, starting out in the school of the world. She had stories to tell of all of them, and I always saw a look of pathetic amazement pass like a shadow across her eyes when one or another would not answer to the name she had given it, edging away from her outstretched hand and suspicious of her voice even upon its softest notes.

The Glimmering of Commonsense

I remember well that first Sunday when I noticed it. Out in the orchard with five or six others of its term was a black calf, well-deserving the name of—Tinker.

She pulled the sweetest blades of grass she could find and softly she approached it.

"Come on, Tinker," she whispered. I think she wanted to show me that first day how surely she had won their hearts. "He was a little devil, Tinker was," she muttered in an aside to us as step by step she drew nearer to him. "It took me an hour every day to wean him. All he did was blow bubbles. Come on, Tinker. Sook-sook-sook-sook-sook."

He looked at the tuft of grass and he looked at her with a roving eye until she was within a yard of him and then, with a flick of his heels in the air, he was off.

She turned round with that look in her eyes then.

"I spent hours over him with sulphur-ointment when he had ringworm," she said, quaintly.

"He'll show his gratitude by growing into a fine big beast," said Cruikshank, to which she replied—

"That sort of gratitude may appeal to you—I don't want it."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I think I know what she wants. It is the world in her lap. Once it has scrambled to the floor she is not one to tie it to her apron strings. Cossetting is not in her nature. If it is a son that is waiting to make his cry as he comes into the world, she will take him softly to her breast and dandle him gently in her lap, but once he flicks his heels in the air, she will never call him back. He may go to the Wars; he may adventure in the farthest corners of the earth and never see her again, or if it be only that he may sneeze, he will always have her generous blessing.

One of Cruikshank's milking cows has developed a disease which in this neighbourhood is known as—low. Her foot is considerably swollen and inflamed. The wretched beast can only hobble out to pasture on three legs. Upon examination, it seems pretty obvious she has split the skin between the toes when some dirt out of the farmyard has penetrated the wound. It is now a festering sore. Grazing is a misery to her. It is no less a misery to Bellwattle to watch her limping out to pasture, yet there is some odd impulse which draws her to look out of the window every time she hears the cows being turned out into the field.

With every step that Daisy takes there is, I

The Glimmering of Commonsense

believe, a sharp, physical pain in Bellwattle's heart. She makes a face as though her foot had been trodden on by a heavy boot.

"Then why do you look?" I asked her.

"Can't help it," she replied. "It's in such pain—you can see it is."

There is something of the spirit of crucifixion in this. I am quite certain she is not conscious of a purpose—indeed there can be none. Her suffering does not help Daisy or ease her pain. Nevertheless there are some people in the world who voluntarily must nail their imaginations to the cross to share the pain of others. Again there are some who will not look at suffering at all, knowing they cannot relieve it.

"The world has enough suffering already," they say, "without our going out of our way to see it."

That is quite logical. There is no end of commonsense about it. But were commonsense the virtue some would demand for it, Christ might have come down from the Cross and saved Himself and the story of Jack the Giant-killer would never have been written.

Bellwattle certainly has not one glimmering of this commonsense. There is little enough of it in Cruikshank. I realised that the other day, when, walking round the fields, we found a hare

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

with a broken leg, lying, incapable of motion, by the side of the hedge.

It was his field, his hedge and consequently he was invested with a proprietary right over the hare. It was for him to say what was to be done with it. The moment he realised that—and it was at once—an odd, grey look came into his face. He searched about in the hedge and in the ditch for a big stone and, having found it, never once looked at me.

“Are you going to kill it?” I asked.

He nodded his head, and there was a pallor in his cheeks that astonished me. I knew he was suffering the tortures of the damned. So far he had those feelings well in control. With calculated precision, he measured his distance and carefully poised his arm to hurl the stone down with the greatest force on the beast’s head. Then he let go. It was noticeable that he could not keep the stone in his hand with which to bash out its brains.

Commonsense might have been of some use to him then, for with the first blow he almost missed it, and the wretched animal was still alive. It twisted and contorted itself on the grass at his feet. It was then that all control of his feelings left him. He seized the stone in his hand

The Glimmering of Commonsense

and beat it again and again on the animal's skull till the whole thing was a pulp of bone and brains and blood, and with every blow he made a cry in his throat.

I am quite certain he did not hear himself. His suffering was deeper than his upper consciousness. These are the noises, the cries men make when they are killing in battle. It is the cry of the soul of a man as it wrestles with the innate savage of his nature.

In bayonet practice, they instruct the men to utter these sounds of violence with every thrust they make. It may be they think it terrifies the enemy. But it seems to me there is no need for such instructions. Be it the savage in the man or be it the soul, both will cry out in the awful struggle of that moment.

When the little beast was dead, Cruikshank stood up and looked at me. The pupils of his eyes were twice their normal size, and even to his lips he was white.

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked.

In answer to that question, he stooped down, picked it up and threw it into the thickest part of the hedge where none but the weasels would ever find it.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"But surely that might have been cooked and eaten," said I.

He looked at me comprehensively.

"Do you imagine she wouldn't have guessed?" he replied.

He had turned to a thought of Bellwattle and already the colour was beginning to come back into his face.

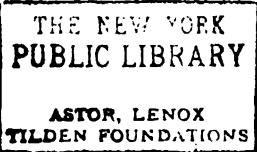


Chapter XV

HEALING PROPERTIES



*"A wife knows her husband
for a silly old fool, no less
than he knows her for an
extravagant hussy."*



CHAPTER XV

HEALING PROPERTIES



UT Daisy with her infirmity has been forgotten. Low—is a gradual business. Like any festering sore, it seems little enough at first. Bellwattle, however, was all for sending to the vet., and at once. She believes in none but the specialist in these matters, and will not give Cruikshank credit for the meanest intelligence where the sufferings of an animal are concerned, or his particular job is not called into question.

“You can’t know a little about everything,” says she. “You paint little pictures and you really play the piano nicely. You can sing. I always say you’ve got quite a nice voice. And I’m quite certain you know something about making a garden. I think any man ought to be satisfied with that and leave a cow when it’s sick to a veterinary surgeon. It’s his job.”

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"How about Cruikshank's *flair*," I interposed timidly, for she was speaking with feeling and, up to that moment, not being interrupted, was gaining force and confidence with every word she said. This question of mine only irritated her.

"*Flair!*" she exclaimed, and I glanced at Cruikshank who was looking like a very small boy trying to remember the lesson he had learnt overnight. I am sure this expression was induced by the effort of endeavouring to think of some crushing reply which apparently did not materialise.

"*Flair!*" she repeated; "You can't cure a cow with a *flair!* That cow's really suffering, and if Cruikshank got a *flair* about curing it, it's as like as not he'd make it worse.

"I shall ask Puddimore," said Cruikshank. "He'll know whether we ought to have a vet. or not."

Bellwattle's eyes were full of contempt. I had never seen her, in the presence of her husband, so vehemently take control of the situation. She laughed ironically at the mention of Puddimore. What was the good of Puddimore, she demanded.

"You can't expect a man to whom you give no wages at all to be able to do a special job like that."

Tactlessly perhaps, but certainly with all gentle-

ness, I pointed out that her argument had the flavour of a syllogism about it.

"I don't care if it tastes of sixty silly gisms," said she with emphasis. "I know I'm right."

All this was approaching a domestic misunderstanding—what in the papers, they might call a fracas—what, when we wish to be understood, we call a blooming row. It was leading up to what is always to me a most distressing incident, a quarrel between husband and wife. And yet—I suppose because I am newly married myself—I became quite interested to see how they would acquit themselves before a third party. Blessed with certain qualities of character, it is possible nine times out of ten for the really bitter words to be avoided, for the unforgiveable things never to be said.

I stood by, somewhat callously I am afraid, just interested to see whether they were like so many married couples I knew, or whether they were possessed of those exceptional characteristics by which these disagreeable affairs are avoided at the eleventh hour.

By my remark about her quality of argument, I had applied a spark to the tinder. But it had not been done intentionally. I was ready to intervene before the worst came to the worst.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

However unintentional that remark had been, Cruikshank, notwithstanding, took immediate advantage of it.

"You can't measure a man's intelligence in these days," said he, "by the wages you pay him. Puddimore's no fool. He's been working on a farm the best part of his life, and that sort of experience is better than all the theoretical knowledge these vets. get at a veterinary school. Savage never employs a vet. at all, and he can't give you chapter or verse for a single thing he does. He's learnt by experience, and the experience of his father before him. So has Puddimore."

"I wouldn't care to leave my life to the tender mercy of Puddimore," said she. "You'd get a specialist if I were ill."

"Well," said Cruikshank, "that cow only cost me thirty-five pounds." He left the delicate inference at that.

Bellwattle refused to smile.

"That seems to me the same silly sort of argument," said she. "You can't measure a thing's value by what you pay for it."

She said this with heat and with triumph. If Cruikshank could beat it, it was up to him to bring her to her knees. I looked at him. Perceptibly he was floundering. She waited there for his

Healing Properties

answer, like a prize-fighter waiting for his opponent to take the count upon the boards.

What would he do if he could find no reply? For this is the moment when these quarrels become serious; this is the moment when a man calls upon his dignity which, in these matters, is like resorting to the solicitor whose letters complete whatever breach has been made between husband and wife.

There is no such thing as dignity in married life. A wife knows her husband for a silly old fool, no less than he knows her for an extravagant hussy, and the sooner they come to a mutual understanding of their characters, the better. Dignity will not save them.

Like the family solicitor, Dignity may represent a man in staid terms to his wife as a fine and knowledgable fellow, but it is all lawyer's talk. No amount of whereas's or whereinbefores will add one inch to his stature in her eyes. Nor will any caresses or soft words whispered in the still night in his arms conceal from a man the fact that his wife is an extravagant hussy.

They have got to make up their minds to it sooner or later, always allowing themselves the consolation that there are plenty of people left in the world before whom they can pose as hero and heroine. If she is a faithful wife she will not

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

give him away when he tells his wittiest story at dinner for the fortieth time. If he is a faithful husband, he will admit before others with a ready cheerfulness how absolutely charming his wife looks in that frock which has well-nigh broken his heart to pay for.

Here, anyhow, was the moment for Cruikshank. Was he going to summon his dignity to help him to his feet. I saw him try. As he floundered there, in his eyes I recognised that expression as he beckoned it. But it was not an actual command. He caught the look turning to laughter in Bellwattle's eyes, and he countermanded his summons. He broke out into laughing, the more likeable for its quality, because she could see it had wrestled with dignity before it came to his lips.

Still laughing, he came to her, taking her by both shoulders.

"This farm's an investment," said he. "I can't throw money away on a vet. if Puddimore's capable of doing the job. I'll send for the vet. if Puddimore's no good. I'll have the beast sent up to St. George's hospital and X-rayed if the vet. can't cure her."

So straight to Puddimore we went, and Puddimore who has more sense of his own importance and infallibility than any man I have ever met,

assured Cruikshank that everything that could be done was being done.

"You ngeave"—he pronounced his l's as though they were n-g. "You ngeave her to me, surr. I've cured many a cow with ugow before. I know awng about it. I've got a cure for she, and it's never fainged yet."

We left it to him and waited for results. Informed of this decision, Bellwattle waited too, and every time she saw Daisy limping out into the meadows, she pointed her out to Cruikshank.

A whole week went by and Daisy was no better. She was worse. On the seventh day she could no longer go out to pasture. She had to be fed in her stall on good hay and mangolds at seven pounds a ton. By this time Cruikshank was beginning to think, and readily accepted Bellwattle's suggestion that they should ask Puddimore what he was doing in the way of a cure.

If only he could be left to himself, he had said mysteriously, he had promised that Daisy should be well in ten days, and except for seeing him applying poultices, or hearing from the kitchen of the hot fomentations he had made, we knew nothing of the treatment.

Cruikshank sent for him and told him that in his opinion Daisy was considerably worse.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"If you can't do better than this," said he, "I shall have to send for the vet."; which was no less than a threat to trample Puddimore's dignity in the mire. "What are you doing for it?" he added. "It's all Tommy-rot making this mystery about it. You're not the only man who knows how to cure 'low.' You'll have to tell me what you're doing, and if I think it's all right you can go on with it. If not, I must send for the vet. Come on—out with it."

Very reluctantly Puddimore muttered something about hot-water fomentations drawing the festering matter out of Daisy's foot. I will not write down in words how he described it.

"And is that all you're doing?" asked Cruikshank, impatiently.

Puddimore lowered his voice.

"I've got an old hat, surr," said he, "and I've took an' hung it on one of those thorn hedges down by the orchard. Time that's been there ten days her'll be as weng as ever she was."

I cannot quite describe the look in Cruikshank's eye when he heard this. There was certainly laughter in it, but then so many other emotions crowded it out of place.

"You hung up an old hat," said he—but then

Healing Properties

could say no more. We walked straight out of the cowshed.

"The vet. 'll be here this afternoon," said Cruikshank as we went. "You'd better come along to hear what he says."

We walked in silence into lunch, and about half-way through the meal Cruikshank remarked—

"I'm sending for the vet. this afternoon. You see I'm not so pig-headed as you imagine. It's quite possible he does know more than Puddimore. At any rate I'm going to give him a chance."

The vet. prescribed Stockholm tar, and when in a week's time Daisy was able—albeit with difficulty—to go out to her grazing once more, we saw Puddimore lurching across the orchard bearing some dirty object in his hand. As he approached us, he held it up in triumph.

"What did I say, surr!" he exclaimed, with the light of achievement in his eye. "I knew awng about that Stockholm tar. I could have told 'ee the vet. would recommend that. But how about this here? This cured 'en."

We were standing near the kitchen-garden where a pile of weeds were burning with that delicious aromatic scent of fire in the green wood. On a sudden impulse, Cruikshank seized the old hat out of Puddimore's hand, and with his stick

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

he thrust it into the red heart of the smoking pile.

"If you don't want to make yourself the laughing-stock of the whole place," said he, "You'll never talk about the healing properties of that blasted hat again."

But I have been wondering quietly to myself since, who it was, Cruikshank thought would laugh the most, and whether that laughter would ever reach Puddimore's ears.

Anyhow, the hat has left no trace.



Chapter XVI
BRINGING HOME THE
MUCK CART

*"You never know what
is going to turn up at
a sale."*



THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION

CHAPTER XVI

BRINGING HOME THE MUCK CART



EVER once, during the whole time I was with them, did Bellwattle go to the market. She has a rooted idea that when it comes to the selling of their beasts, farmers are cruel to them. Cruel is a strong word. Perhaps inconsiderate would be better.

In any case she is wrong, but will not be persuaded to believe it. Nevertheless it is as well she does not go to market, for if the farmer as a rule does care for his beast, the dealer certainly does not.

It was always a disgusting sight to me, watching those dealers who every fortnight came by train from cities within a radius of sixty and seventy miles to the Tewkesbury Market. Their calling was written on the pages of their face, and no amount of the liquor they consumed could wash away the stain of it.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Taking him all round, the farmer is an honest man. His calling demands it of him. His good name insists upon it. But the dealer is little better than a charlatan and a rogue. His job is another man's labour, his energy, the sweat on another's brow, and his wage the savings he can cajole or conjure out of another's pocket.

The dealing spirit is ruining farming in this country, and it ought to be taxed out of existence until it becomes a calling not worth a man's while to follow.

The productive spirit is that alone which weighs in the balance. But so long as the dealers and the middlemen can make their handsome profits by the picking of other's brains, and sneaking the fruit of another's labours the dealing spirit will maintain and some men will get the control of what never belonged to them.

This dissertation has little or nothing to do with my friends Cruikshank and Bellwattle, yet apart from them it is one of the strongest impressions I received during my stay at Lemington.

That dealing spirit encourages no virtue that any man might be proud to possess. Sharpness, shrewdness, hard-heartedness and unscrupulousness, these are the qualities a dealer must cherish to make his way amongst his class, whereby it

Bringing Home the Muck Cart

may be assumed that the man who fails has some redeeming virtue about him.

The farmers themselves—doubtless by force of competition—are acquiring the spirit too. There was one man I met while I was down there who had spent three good working days persuading an old spinster lady to sell her litter of pigs at a price upon which he could realise a substantial profit in the market.

In an unwise moment, and without consulting her man, she had said she would part with them for twenty-five shillings a head. Without a moment's hesitation the farmer nailed her to that price. He spat on his hand and offered it to her to shake, which is what one might call the sign manual of a bargain.

She tried to wriggle out of so swift a transaction. She said she would consult her man.

"You can consult your man," said he, "but that's a bargain."

Her man informed her they were worth every penny of forty-five shillings, and when the farmer came over the next day, leaving his work to take care of itself, she informed him she had mentioned too low a sum.

"Mentioned!" he bullied her. "You said you'd take that, and if you want to keep to your word,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

that's what you ought to take. We shook hands on it."

The following day he came over again and saw her man, arranging with him that if he got the pigs for twenty-five shillings, the man should have a shilling a head on them. A clear profit of nine shillings.

He told us all this as though it were a mighty clever piece of business. He could not tell us what the man said to his mistress, but he got the pigs for twenty-five shillings a head, and he sold them for forty-five in the open market by dint of running up the price a bit himself.

"Do you think that compensated you," I asked, "for the loss of three days' work on your farm?"

"It was a smart bit of business," was all he replied. "If I'd left she alone one minute, I'd have lost they pigs."

It was never this spirit that made England. It is never this spirit that will keep her the home of

"This happy breed of men, this little world
This precious stone set in a silver sea."

or make of her—

"This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
"Dear for her reputation through the world."

Bringing Home the Muck Cart

He was a dear soul indeed, that farmer, and it was the dealing spirit that had cherished him.

In her decision then about the markets, Bellwattle is quite right. The dealers have no consideration for the beasts upon whom they have lost no love of labour in the breeding and whose rearing has cost them not one drop of sweat upon the brow.

Their very expression of face as they look at a beast in the ring, prodding it with their sticks, pinching it with their fingers, would give one the impression that farming is a soulless business, if one did not know that these men are they who mostly live in cities, and have no swelling of the heart at the sight of a rich green field or know no sense of hope that lifts towards summer when first the cuckoo's note is heard above the trees.

Bellwattle does not go to market, but on one occasion she came with Cruikshank and me to a sale at a farm some distance away. You never know what is going to turn up at a sale—what bargains may not be found. If you can make a day to spare, it is often profitable to go there, so long as it is not too far.

This sale was seven miles away. The car brought us there in a few minutes.

But it was an unfortunate choice we had taken.

Sheepskins and Steep Russet

Into the ring, composed of farmers and dealers in the farmyard, they drove a heifer that had had its eye gouged out by another's horn. The beast was bellowing with pain. There was the empty socket, oozing a stream of blood.

"She'll go cheap," I heard one man whisper eagerly.

No one offered a hand. She was driven like the rest into the ring, the auctioneer remarking that she'd had an accident, and would be blind in one eye, but he ventured the suggestion that she had not lost in value on that account.

Cruikshank thrust his way through the crowd to stand in front of Bellwattle so that she might not see. There was nothing that could really be done. The beast was there to be sold, and it could only be hoped that the man who bought her would do the best he could for it.

He pushed his way in front of her, but he was not quick enough. I doubt whether it would be humanly possible to hide an animal's sufferings from her.

"Why, it's all bleeding, and it's in terrible pain!" she called out above the noise of the bidding, and nearly every man around that ring had a laugh in reply to her.

It needs an amount of spirit to do the right thing.

Bringing Home the Muck Cart

It needs an absolute indifference to other people's affairs to seize and control a situation on the spur of the moment.

We might have stopped the sale of that beast then and there. We might have gone into the ring and harangued the whole lot of them, auctioneer included, if we could have made ourselves heard for laughter. But it had to be done on the instant, and that instant spent in considering it, made it too late. The next moment the heifer was knocked down for fifteen pounds and was being hustled out of the ring.

We found Bellwattle later in the stall where the beast had been driven. She was talking to the buyer, asking him what he was going to do to ease the poor beast's pain, and murmuring the sort of gentle consolations she addresses to animals in distress. God knows whether they bring any relief. Commonsense impels one to doubt it, yet the sound of her voice on these occasions is as soothing as a cool pillow to an aching head.

The one bargain at that sale which Cruikshank secured, was a muck cart for thirty shillings.

As the hammer fell on his last bid, he turned round to me with a helpless expression on his face.

"How the devil am I going to take it home?" said he. And I could not tell him.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

We went round from one man to another trying to hire a horse. There was not one of them had a horse to spare.

The solution of his difficulty, however, was not long in appearing. There was an old cart-horse for sale. Bonny was her name and bonny indeed she was, but bonny in the sense of a good old dame who has scores of great grandchildren to bear her name down to posterity, who yet with all her childbearing has kept a ruddy pair of cheeks and a glistening eye.

Bonny was the strangest thing in the way of horses I had ever seen. Her back had that slope in it which somehow from my childhood I have always associated with a circus horse. Her mane and tail were skittishly long, and much too curly for an old lady of her age.

I heard one man say she was thirty-six years old, and had been working on that farm when he was a boy. Nevertheless, she came out of her stable, prancing like a stallion, albeit she had a lame leg, putting her hoof to the ground as though she were laying a pancake on a dish.

The moment Bellwattle saw her, she loved her. The moment she had fondled the soft pouch under her chin, I knew Bonny was as good as bought.

Bringing Home the Muck Cart

"She's too old. She's not any good," said Cruikshank concealing his determination to buy her, behind Bellwattle's passion to possess.

There was no scratching of noses over this affair. It was open and above board. In a loud voice he offered two pounds over the first bid of thirty shillings.

Stealing a glance at Bellwattle, I could see her heart was already beginning to beat. As well as the desire to have Bonny for her own, the fever of the auction had caught her. Swiftly she was rising to that temperature when you feel that at all costs the thing must be your own; when every bid that is offered against you is a direct insult in your face.

"Go on," she whispered. "Go on"; and the bidding rose to four pounds.

"Say five," she urged him—"go on, say five! Five pounds for a horse, why it's perfectly preposterous!" And the mere calling it a horse made it appear in the guise of a Derby winner to her. She could not conceive a horse being worth more dead than alive, and to the dealer in dead horses, having no more value than its skin together with what could be sold to the cats in the neighbourhood.

"I shall say five if you don't!" she whispered.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"Five pounds," said Cruikshank, in the heat of that moment, believing her and knowing that he would have to pay it if she did.

"Five pounds, gentlemen, I'm offered for this good old horse. She's got another two years' hard work in front of her."

"We're not going to work her 'hard,' whispered Bellwattle.

"Five pounds! Is that all you're going to allow me to say for her? She's served the owner well."

"The creature!" interposed Bellwattle.

"She'll serve the buyer another two years and more, and she'll serve him the same way. Come along gentlemen, five pounds is poor bidding for a willing beast. You'd pay that much in five weeks for a lazy carter, and here's an animal won't know what laziness is for two years and more. Come along gentlemen, put your hands in your pockets! I can't stand here all day. Let me say five pounds ten."

Bellwattle's temperature rose another degree.

"Why can't he knock his old hammer down!" she exclaimed.

"Very well, I will, madam," said he, and the hammer fell on his book.

"Anyhow—thank God I can get my muck cart

Bringing Home the Muck Cart

home," said Cruikshank, and followed the auctioneer to another part of the farm where he was selling a collection of harness that would have made a saddler laugh.



Chapter XVII

FOUR DUCKS ON A POND



*"One of them turned upside
down in the water to show
how little he cared."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XVII

FOUR DUCKS ON A POND



SUPPOSE a week must have gone by since Cruikshank with that glow on his face had told me of Bellwattle's great expectations. Nothing more had been said by him. There had been no allusion to it by her.

I watched their faces for any sign of disappointment, but there was none. Very obviously to me they were two happy people, like a pair of children sharing a real and tremendous secret, talking about it only in the corners which in married life, I take it, are those half hours after the candle has been blown out, and the darkness alone makes a whisper of everything you say.

Often in those seven days, I wondered how it would affect the farming; whether, with a young thing of her own, Bellwattle would prove so conscientious and capable a rearer of calves. I had my own suspicion that the mortality amongst

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

young cattle at Lemington Court was likely to go back to fifty per cent., when once there was one of the young breed of Townshend—which, for those who do not recall it, was their name—shouting his demands through the stables of the house.

Whatever sort of a little devil he might be, there were bound to be tricks by which he would endear himself to Bellwattle's heart. He might not be able to put his head between her legs and lift her off her feet—not for a while at any rate. But he would have fat fingers, and he would have fat toes, all of which would need counting in Bellwattle's terms of the lower mathematics. There were corners he would insist upon for himself against her breast and in the hollow of her arm, and making a nest for him in these places, I calculated would be more engrossing than spreading a bed of straw for a sick calf which, like as not, the little beast might toss to the four corners of the stable in five minutes.

I was very eager to know what she had to say about it, yet timid to broach the subject myself. It may fairly well be assumed that women have a tremendous sense of pride in these matters. To make a live thing that is going for so many years to thrust its way through the world is a far more tangible and praiseworthy an affair than the

Four Ducks on a Pond

creation of a thousand works of art. For, however many times it has been done before, each woman can, if she wills it, set the stamp of her originality upon the finished product.

No doubt the artist will say that he creates out of nothing less than the functions of his brain and the quality of his imagination; that he has none but himself to help him to his task. But it seems to me that while a child may be built up out of the thousands of years of Nature's handicraft, so a masterpiece is Nature's handicraft as well, and no more than a culmination of experience, finding its expression in the brain of a particular man.

As for having none but himself to help him to his task, the artist who tells you that is breathing what they call the hot air of commercialism. There is some woman's influence somewhere at the back of all these undertakings. These children of men's minds have full parentage, and the nobler they are, the more plainly will be confessed in them that woman who sowed the seed of their being. There is no such thing as misogamy when it comes to a work of art, and no such creature as a misanthrope ever made a success of maternity.

If Otto Weininger was an artist, which is open to question, he nevertheless hated women, but

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

only because they would not permit him to love them. In any case he was a German. And if my mind seeks for instances to prove my case, I take but one step to find the name of Beatrice and care not who may say I am easily content.

I was indeed eager to talk to Bellwattle, but came to the conclusion it were best to bide my time until she spoke of her own accord.

Seven days as I have said had gone by, and not another word had been offered by Cruikshank, while Bellwattle had been absolutely silent on the subject. It was then one evening while I was helping her collect the ducks into that establishment which Cruikshank himself had built for their accommodation by the pond, that she spoke.

Collecting those ducks of an evening was a jolly business. They could not be left out, for heaven only knows where they would have laid their eggs, and the early morning being the favourite time for the depositing of their little works of art, they had to be shut up overnight and kept under lock and key till so to speak, they had written their chapters on the duck-house floor.

The process of collecting them sounds simple enough. Evening was their hour of feeding. All you had to do was to fill a tin basin with corn, go through the farmyard making a noise with it

Four Ducks on a Pond

like Cruikshank did with the cider-house keys, and whistle all the while a long note that died away in a plaintive diminuendo.

From every quarter they came at once, waddling after you in a streaming line as you walked whistling to the orchard. By judicious scattering of the corn you seduced them to the very door of their house and then, by good aiming, throwing the corn inside the house, you inveigled them within.

But the process was not as simple as it sounds. Once having induced them to compliance, you had to shut the door, and without exception, every evening, there was one or more, feeling no movement of those inspirations towards the creation of a masterpiece in the early morning, who managed, with a clatter of cries and a beating of wings, to escape and make her way direct to the centre of the pond, where, objecting perhaps on conscientious grounds, she knew she was safe from coercion.

Engaged in that occupation of the press-gang and, as we walked, whistling, across the orchard, Bellwattle, without looking at me, said suddenly—

“What did you and Cruikshank talk about that second evening after you came, when you shut yourselves up in the study? The night I was darning socks!”

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I looked at her swiftly, divining she did not ask because she wanted to know, but because she knew, yet fearing to act upon this instinctive assumption.

"All sorts of things," said I guardedly—"mostly the farm of course."

She paused a moment and then she added—"Did he tell you?"

I was not going to be caught in a trap. I was determined she should broach the subject if it were to be broached at all. A woman will tell you much more when it is she who has opened the door of her confidence. If it is you who force the lock, as like as not you will find an empty room.

"Did he tell me what?" I inquired.

She hesitated, and then there was the most attractive shyness in her face and voice as she said—

"Tell you—that I was going to have a baby?"

I was glad I had not admitted too readily my receipt of his confidence. I should have missed that look. I might never have heard that note in her voice.

It reminded me of a moment in our courtship, when once I came upon Clarissa making a garment out of what I think they call—lawn. There

Four Ducks on a Pond

is a delicious coolness about that word. It is light, like a breeze.

I asked her what she was making when, taking my eye off it with her own, as a conjurer decoys away the eye of his audience from the purpose of his hands, she said—

“Never mind.”

The look in her eyes then was more dainty concealment than any garment of the finest lawn her fingers could ever have stitched.

“Yes—he told me—” I replied to Bellwattle—
“I can’t wish you more happiness than you’re hoping for. Didn’t you want him to?”

She scattered a handful of corn at the entrance to the duck’s house, for we had both ceased from whistling, and the ducks were getting bewildered at the alteration of their invariable programme. “I told him not to tell anyone,” said she, “but, of course, you’re different, A. H.”

I was glad to hear her say that; but why was I different? Perhaps because I am one of those ugly devils who does not count; one of those ugly devils a woman confides in as she would put away her private correspondence in a strong box which sacrifices all pretensions to an attractive exterior in order to give place to security.

But if I wondered about her confidence, still

Sheepskins and Greg Russet

more did I speculate upon her reasons for not wishing Cruikshank to tell anyone else. In silence I made my speculations whilst she collected the ducks into their house. Four little beasts escaped and fled to their refuge in the centre of the pond.

After cajoling them in all sorts of ways from the bank, Bellwattle gave it up with a final thrust at their refusal to oblige.

"Well, if you won't lay, you won't!" she shouted at them, and one of them turned upside down in the water to show how little she cared.

"What are you standing there thinking about?" asked Bellwattle, looking round at me.

"I was wondering," said I, "why you didn't want Cruikshank to tell anyone. I thought women were proud on these occasions."

She slipped an arm through mine and we stood there looking across the pond.

"So proud," she replied in a low register of her voice, "so proud that they're mighty afraid of making a failure of it all. So proud that sometimes they daren't believe it's true. So proud that they'd let their husbands think it was just a common-or-garden affair that had to be put up with for fear it might never have to be put up with at all."

Four Ducks on a Pond

"But why should you be so tremulous about it?" I asked.

"I shouldn't have been," said she, "if it had happened the first year we were married. One expects that—counts on it. But when seven years go by and you begin to feel you're different to every other woman in the world; when seven years go by and you've been standing like some one waiting on the crest of a hill looking for miles down a moorland road, watching for a traveller who never comes, it's hard to believe it's true—it's hard to believe it's really him when, in that distance, just where the road's wound out to its thinnest thread, you see a little dim figure, which seems at first as if it wasn't moving at all. There and then, you don't rush home, I can tell you, shouting out at the top of your voice that he's coming. You sort of hug yourself to yourself—you wouldn't know what that meant—and the only thing you do is that instead of standing up you sit down and you look away for as long as you can. Sometimes you count a hundred, and it seems like a thousand. And then you look round and the dim figure is still there, but as far as you can remember, it doesn't seem to have moved at all. It moves very slowly, that dim, little figure, A. H., and the road is nine mile long."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I dropped my hand into hers and I gripped it.

"He'll arrive all right," said I, "this traveller of yours, and he'll bring all sorts of splendid things in his pack. You'll think back one of these days and wonder why you ever doubted."

And then I turned her with my arm and pointed before us—somehow it seemed applicable—

"Four ducks on a pond," I quoted—
A grass bank beyond;
A blue sky of Spring,
White clouds on the wing."

and did not realise how it might be turned until she continued—

"How little a thing
To remember for years,
To remember with tears!"



Chapter XVIII

RED TAPE



"Hea-a-a Was! Hea-a-a Was!"

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XVIII

RED TAPE



HEN driving pigs in that part of Gloucestershire, you beat the ground before you with a long stick, uttering at the same time in guttural tones the cry, "Hea-a-a Waz!

Hea-a-a Waz!"

Even then you are lucky if you get one out of ten to its destination.

There is a lot to be written of pigs, their treatment, their profit possibilities, but God forbid this chronicle should have anything in the nature of a text book about it. It is sufficient for me to describe their habits, not so much for the benefit of those who would rear them, but in illustration of the devil's own nuisance they can be.

I never look back upon those months at the farm as to an association with a money-making concern, so much as a series of adventures. Cruikshank kept about twenty pigs, and certainly he

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

made money out of them. They paid extraordinarily well. But what he suffered and what Bellwattle endured because of those pigs, will make far better reading to any but those who imagine that in this volume they are going to find sound advice as to how they can make money out of their acres.

Bellwattle had a remote corner in her heart for pigs, that is to say they had to take their chance with her heart, and the only chance they had was when they were young, pink or sooty-black and in that condition of nakedness which makes a way for any young thing into a woman's affections.

As they grew old and fat and lazy, in fact the nearer they approached the gates of the market, the further did they leave Bellwattle's interest in them behind.

To put it briefly, Bellwattle comes to them with a spoon in her hand, and leaves the sty directly Cruikshank appears with the scales.

As well, she likes their antics, as she likes all animals when they are little devils. But it was their antics which nearly brought Cruikshank with grey hairs in sorrow to his grave.

Rightly or wrongly he had an idea that it was a good thing to put young pigs out in the orchard to graze and fend for themselves for a good month

before he proceeded to fatten them. He said they made bone to carry their flesh.

With the amount of exercise they achieved during that month, it is quite probable he was right. But he had to pay for their bone. There is no hedge grown in England that will keep a young pig in its own field. There is no pasture so delectable to a young pig as that on your next door neighbour's farm.

Almost every day word was brought to Cruikshank that his pigs were wandering in adjoining fields, and though the farmer's language—what you might expect a farmer's language to be in respect of pigs—was delivered without respect of persons, I fancy, as I look back upon it all, that it was justified.

Then on these occasions, Cruikshank would run for his big stick and go beating through the fields, shouting out his—"Hea-a-a Waz! Hea-a-a Waz!" and adding other remarks which an anxious publisher intent upon the morals of his public would ask me to delete were I to write them down.

I do most honestly think that farmer was justified in every temperature of his wrath, the more so when I remember how he had pigs of his own.

Going out on to the road one morning, Cruikshank and I found a herd of them—ten at least—

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

strolling towards the house with that obstinate expression in their faces as though they would stand no interference. By successful strategy we turned them back when, with casual indifference, they strolled through the farmer's garden-gate which he had left open, and what they did there in the way of damage for the next hour or more, I can only imagine. I must admit my imagination makes me chuckle. For apparently, after a glorious hour, they returned to their stys, and lay down with all that apparent innocence which only a pig can assume.

A quarter of an hour later, the farmer was at the door of the Court, declaring in language he meant us not to misunderstand, that Cruikshank's pigs had been in his garden. He was not in that state of lucidity of intelligence to understand our explanations. Blood runs easily to the head of any man when he is talking about the piracy of pigs.

By minute description of the herd, however, I fancy we made it clear to him whose pigs they were, wherefore I feel amply justified in according him all the sympathy he truly deserves for the excursions of Cruikshank's beasts. He was a gentle-mannered man when the blood was not in his head, and I have seen him of a Sunday in

his orchard walking with his arm around his wife. I believe he was a churchwarden too.

Truly, fattening and selling pigs are not the only things that happen in one's dealings with them.

I was with Cruikshank once when he bought three of the most miserable looking little creatures I had ever seen. There was a vein of false economy in Cruikshank's disposition, partly stimulated I do believe by that same *flair* he had for everything.

Obviously these pigs were not worth the buying. I believe they all had rickets, and were husky into the bargain. In answer to the prods of various farmers' sticks, they rose laboriously to their feet only to fall recumbent in another corner of the pen.

The bidding started at ten shillings a head. The man who offered it hoped it would never be taken. With an effort they went to fourteen shillings.

"I'll just make one bid," said Cruikshank, "they might pick up if I feed 'em well."

This was his *flair*. He believed in himself. He was sure he could make healthy beasts of them. He offered fifteen shillings, and as they were knocked down to him, I heard a farmer near by mutter—

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"He must want pigs bad."

One of those pigs certainly pulled through, and sold in the open market for ninety-five shillings. But one of the others died. Given a bed in an old canvas trunk, it was brought in its sickness by Bellwattle, and nursed near the kitchen fire. If I remember rightly, Cruikshank discovered her giving it some of his best liqueur brandy out of a spoon, and in reply to his expostulations, she retorted—

"Well, you bought it cheap."

Bellwattle's conception of money is that of a millionaire's. If a thing is bought cheap, she will contrive to make it expensive before she has done with it, or she will have nothing to do with it all. You can make a cheap pig cost no end with internal applications of liqueur brandy, for however sick a pig is, it knows a good thing when it tastes it. Notwithstanding all these attentions, the pig died, whereupon, consistent with all the requisitions of red tape, notice had to be given immediately to the police. I have never seen a case of swine fever, and am sure it is to be avoided like the plague, wherefore every pig that dies is assumed to have had swine fever until it is proved to the contrary.

In immediate reply to Cruikshank's notifica-

tion, there came a veterinary surgeon and a solemn official who held long confabulations over the body of the little beast lying in its canvas coffin. Then they took it away to a shed where we all tried our hardest not to think of the operations that were being performed on the body of our late invalid.

We never knew what conclusion they came to, but they killed two other healthy little grunTERS whose tails might that morning have come out of curling-papers in such state of health they were.

"What did they do that for?" asked Bellwattle, incensed beyond measure when they had gone.

"To see what the other pig died of," said Cruikshank. "You must remember the Board of Agriculture is a Government institution. It has to justify its expenditure to the Treasury, and you can guess what the Treasury officials know about pigs. They send round pamphlets on scientific farming, and every farmer I know reads them like the funny-story page in *Tit-Bits*. But it helps to accumulate the annual bill of expenditure."

All this worked Bellwattle into a frenzy.

"It's positively iniquitous!" she cried.

"They gave me the price I paid for the pigs," said Cruikshank.

"Where do they get the money from?" she asked.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

“There,” I interposed, “you’ve got at the crux of it all. It’s the habit of human nature and the principle of Governments to be lavish with other people’s money. What do you imagine a Treasury official cares for my three shillings or whatever it is in the pound? He’s spending money from a well-nigh illimitable fund, supplied by people he doesn’t know from Adam. We’ve made life into such a bundle that it has to be tied up with red tape, and not only do we have to pay for the tape, but we have to pay officials to know it.”

Bellwattle thrust into her basket for a pair of socks and began darning. I could see by her stitches what she felt.



Chapter XIX
PUBLIC SPIRIT



*"Every house has its pump,
and three or four of them
boast of the best water in
the village."*

CHAPTER XIX

PUBLIC SPIRIT



CRUIKSHANK convened a meeting of the farmers in the neighbourhood. Occupying one of the largest houses in the village, the vicar was invited to attend. It was occasioned by the following circumstances.

The village of Lemington lies some half mile or so away from the main road from Tewkesbury to Gloucester. Half way between the village and the road there has been erected within recent years a home for incurables, and so far as this home, but no farther, the water has been laid on from the main supply. A quarter of a mile away lies Lemington, dependent entirely upon its wells. Every house has its pump, and three or four of them boast of the best water in the village. The remainder are content to admit that their water is far from good.

When Cruikshank told me he had not had the

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

water in his well analysed at the time of purchase, I made no comment. My silence gave him a furious thought, for he asked quickly whether I thought he ought to have done so.

"You make your house your mistress," said I; "it's not for me to criticise the way you chose her. If she has imperfections, I expect you're passionately enough attached to her to overlook them."

He went away thoughtfully and out of my bedroom window I saw him ten minutes later drawing a glass of water out of the pump outside the kitchen-door, looking at it against the light, and drinking it with long delays upon his palate as if it had been a glass of good old '67.

Apparently it was quite all right for a time, but then they had a two days' flood in the river that runs by the Crooked Withy meadow, and the imperfections of his mistress became apparent then. It might be said she became slovenly in appearance, and took to wearing a most objectionable scent, for suddenly, one morning, we found the water a dirty colour, and the odour of it drove us straight to the cider store for drinking purposes.

It grew worse rather than better, and then Cruikshank took it into Gloucester to the analyst who, with all his glass retorts and his reagents,

sent in a report that made our hair stand on end. The amount of bacteria to the cubic centimetre was apparently enough to accommodate fifty epidemics. In conclusion his report stated it was quite unfit to drink.

"Why in the name of Heaven," said Cruikshank as he read this through at breakfast—"Why in the name of heaven they haven't got enough public spirit to get the water laid on from the main supply when it's only a quarter of a mile away, I can't understand."

"The birth of public spirit," said I, "is individual necessity. You can only rear it to maturity by a general need."

He was in no mood for subtleties and paid not the slightest attention to what I said.

"I shall call a meeting of the farmers round here," he declared, "and see what can be done."

So the historic meeting was convened. Cruikshank wrote a very able letter setting forth the needs of the parish, and calling upon the public spirit of the farmers to come and meet him one evening at the Court to see what could be done in the way of finding the remedy for a common evil.

I think that evening, when the large sitting room was prepared for their arrival, Cruikshank

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

felt somewhat like King John at Runnymede about to meet the Barons. He fussed about the house, giving orders, and in that mood was completely superior to and almost unconscious of Bellwattle. Obviously it was an affair of the public commonweal with which the feminine mind could not aspire to cope.

With a gentle obedience, Bellwattle took her place in the background, whispering to me—"They'll all have something to drink, so I expect they'll enjoy themselves. I'm sure Cruikshank will."

I, too, am certain that he did. When they were all arrived and comfortably or uncomfortably seated in their chairs according to their ease of mind at being in a strange house, Cruikshank stood up in front of the fireplace and addressed them.

He painted livid pictures of epidemics as he had read of them. He might have been talking of the Black Death, and as though, in the last week, it had strode into their midst.

"You may have to be lending your muck carts to take the dead bodies to the graveyard," said he, and then I knew he had been reading his history of England in the reign of Charles I.

Through all this harangue, I looked at their



*"Cruikshank stood up in
front of the fireplace and
addressed them."*

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

faces, and upon my soul I don't know whether they appreciated the extent of his eloquence or not. It was true enough that the need for a common water supply was vital to the health of the village, but none of them, like Cruikshank, had an analyst's report in their pockets, giving evidence of myriads of bacteria in the water they had to drink.

To begin with it would raise the rates in the parish, in addition to which the Urban District Council required the guarantee of a certain sum of money, some three hundred pounds I think it was, before they would undertake to begin the necessary work. It would have been returned, of course, but it represented a sum of capital which I can quite understand none of them were eager to invest.

It was, no doubt, a twinge of his conscience, the feeling of that report in his breast pocket so close to his heart, which made Cruikshank offer to put up that sum, if one and all they would consent to attach their names to an appeal he had already drawn out to be sent to the Urban District Council.

They all of them were willing but one man. Not very long ago, his landlord had sunk a new well in his grounds and the water was excellent.

"I don't see why I should pay extra rates for a water supply," said he, "when what I've got suits me all right."

Cruikshank got excited, talked about public spirit, and tried to shame him into signing the paper, for it was essential that all their names should appear. An Urban District Council does not spend other people's money for other people's good unless it is forcibly driven to it.

But no, he would not sign. Why should he? I had made my remark about public spirit half in jest, but I was beginning to believe how true it was. His well gave him an excellent supply. Why should he pay extra rates for an advantage that would serve everyone but himself?

It was really a matter for the general health, but an Urban District Council would require to see it's epidemic first before it operated.

I rose tentatively and suggested that. Let them produce an epidemic, I proposed, and then the Urban District Council would do the work without any demand for a guarantee at all.

I was trying to disclose the humour of the situation, and apparently I succeeded, for a quiet farmer, seated in a corner of the room, cleared his throat and addressed himself to the one withholder.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"Don't Mr. Townshend's land lie a bit higher than your'n?"

He had to admit it did.

"Well, why shouldn't he sink a well for 'enself, just above your'n, and then your well'ud run dry?"

I took out my handkerchief and concealed the best part of my face in it as I blew my nose.

"I could sink my well deeper," said the farmer.

"And for every foot you sunk yours," said Cruikshank, "I could go on sinking mine."

They all signed.

The document was duly despatched to the Clerk of the Urban District Council and there in the records I imagine it remains to this day, a notable document in the archives of the history of Tewkesbury.

By the time the Clerk of the Urban District Council had signified his receipt of the document, the floods had abated in the river and the water had cleared in Cruikshank's well. With its returning clarity, all Cruikshank's public spirit had disappeared.

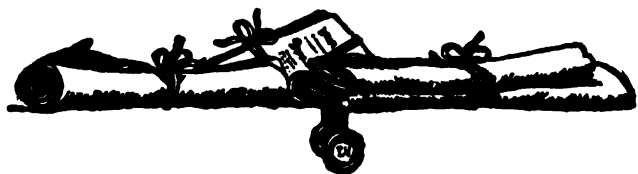
Alluding to the whole affair two months later, he said—

"Well, I did my best. It'll not be my fault

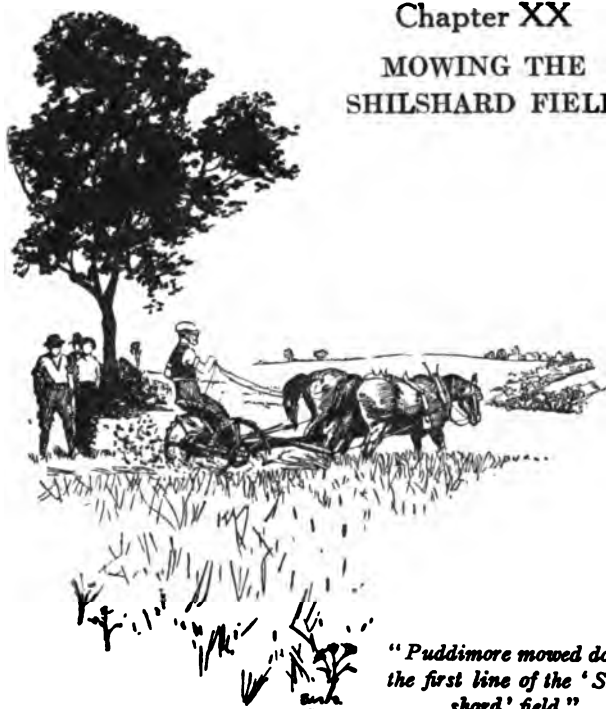
Public Spirit

if one day they contract typhus fever and die like flies. Come and have a glass of cider.

I really believe he thinks he is a public benefactor thwarted in the philanthropy of his heart's desires.



Chapter XX
MOWING THE
SHILSHARD FIELD



*"Puddimore mowed down
the first line of the 'Shil-
shard' field."*

**THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

**ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION**

CHAPTER XX

MOWING THE SHILSHARD FIELD



LOOKING back upon it all, along the lines of the generous perspective of time, my recollections of the haymaking bring me the warmest memories. That is as it might be expected. Haymaking is generally suggestive of holiday time, yet it is as no holiday that I remember it. Making eighty tons of hay when it has to be made, lest good money should be absolutely lost, has no resemblance to wandering into a hayfield, and giving a hand at tossing a few swathes over in the sun, or building a few hay-cocks in order to make a cup of tea taste better than it ever tasted before.

When you have to do it and do it on as large a scale as this, haymaking is as hard a labour as any I know. Yet, however hard it is, there is a glamour about it which no other agricultural work can quite equal.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

It is the very beginning of the summer; the first harvest of all. You are not gathering in the lateness of the year, rather it is the youth of it in all the freshness of its green. It is not the hard dry stubble you leave behind you as the knives go through the standing blades, but a rich green bed from which yet another harvest may be reaped before the year is sped.

And the scent of it and the heat of it (for no one who has ever made hay, unless their disposition be incorrigibly morbid, will associate the undertaking with foul weather), and the light of those early mornings when first you harness the horses to the mower, seeing that all is ready before you give the first flick of the long rope reins, these are conditions of the whole proceedings which make it shine in your memory, and shine the brighter as the years fall in between.

That first note of the mowing machine which, when one morning as you rise from your bed, tells you that some farmer has begun his cutting, is like the keynote of the summer's oratorio. For the days to come, that will be the note upon which all melody of the music of the land is played. Up and down the fields those instruments will play in unaffected orchestration, till the day throbs with their tune.

Mowing the Shilshard Field

Never shall I forget that first morning when, overnight, the mower had had its finishing touches, and at four o'clock, past daybreak, was brought out into the "Shilshard" field. There was the chill of dew in the air and that pale light which promises a burning day. With the first few steps into the grass our boots were soaked with wet. In the hedges and the elm trees, the birds were singing intermittently, those waking notes which always seem to me as though they can scarce believe the daylight has returned again. There is the spirit of wonder in them.

The horses were half asleep as they were led to the pole of the machine and harnessed. They walked as though it were a dream. We were half in a dream ourselves. With the sounds of labour, the whirring knives, the cries to the horses, the inevitable pauses and the sudden cessations of noise, we were soon to be awake. But until it began, it was all like the action of a fairy tale, the building of a castle in a night, or the emptying of a lake with a thimble for a bucket.

There waved the acres of grass before us, and in that pale light of early morning, with the sleep still in our eyes, it might have been a thousand acres instead of sixteen for all the possibility there seemed of getting the smallest portion of it cut that day.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Plucking a handful of grass to make a cushion for himself on the iron seat, Puddimore mounted to his place, and took the long rope reins in his hands. No whip he needed, for he could crack those rope reins on the horses' flanks till the beasts jumped forward in their harness. We felt in that moment, he was like an intrepid pilot setting out upon a voyage across the limitless sea.

I think he caught that spirit of expectation from us both, for he made the most of it. There was something histrionic in the way he looked at us when all was ready. Truly histrionic he was in his gestures as he raised the rope reins in his hand, and with a flick of the wrist made them resound with a loud report on the horses' sides, crying out their names as he did so—

“Hey-up Short! Hey-up Prince!”

And then with the sudden roar of the pulsing knives, the rattle of the wheels and the jangling of harness, he was launched out into the sea of meadow grass. The voyage was started. Our haymaking was begun.

As long as I live—insignificant though it may be—I shall remember that moment. We had talked of it for so many days beforehand. So many calculations had been made of the yield of hay to the acre, and the price it would fetch.

Mowing the Shilshard Field

So many speculations had been indulged in about the prospects of the weather. Five or six times a day, Cruikshank had consulted his weather-glass in the hall.

And now it had begun. I can see the grass falling down prostrate in tumbling waves as though by magic before those relentless knives. I can see the dust of pollen and scattering seed, which, like dust on a highway, spread out in clouds on the morning air in the wake of the machine.

I can hear the notes of the birds rising to a livelier measure when once they realised man had begun his work for the day, and there was food for them to be gathered. I can hear the cries of Puddimore to the horses dying away in the distance of the field. I can see that look of pride in Cruikshank's face as he came to wakefulness and the realisation of labour. I can taste that first scent in my nostrils, that scent of new-cut grass, damp with the dew, which is unlike any other perfume in the world. It is not the scent of hay. There are many scents like that. The dried leaves of Woodruffe will concentrate the scent of a whole hayfield in a little bowl. It is more a taste, than a scent, that odour of new-cut grass. You find it cool on your tongue; you swallow it and still it runs cool through your veins.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

It is like the essence of some nectar that is both chill and sweet.

So we stood that morning while Puddimore mowed down the first line of the "Shilshard" field. But before he had got to the bottom of the line, the machine had stopped with a sudden jerk.

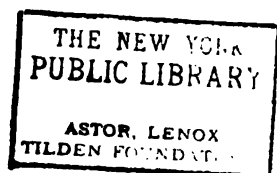
The damned fool had let the rope reins dangle between his legs, and they had got caught in the open cogwheels of the machine. There they were, enmeshed so deep that nothing on earth could extricate them. For an hour or more all work was at a standstill, and it was half-past four in the morning.



Chapter XXI
PUDDIMORE
ACTS
SUSPICIOUSLY



*"Obviously more engaged
in looking at the windows
of the house."*



CHAPTER XXI

PUDDIMORE ACTS SUSPICIOUSLY



HIS mishap was only the beginning of our troubles. By the time we had tried to burn the rope out of the cogs with paraffin; by the time Cruikshank had barked his knuckles, and sliced his hand with a knife employed in cutting the confounded stuff away which, with the close pressure of the cogs had been crushed to the hardness and consistency of wood; by the time he had lost his temper and was swearing at Puddimore, and Puddimore—now robbed of all histrionic glamour was almost in tears, it was close on breakfast time.

Then Bellwattle came out to the field where, with patience and a hat-pin, she extricated the obstructing rope from the wheels. The relief was so great that we all went into our meal, determined to make a fresh start when a little food and cups of hot tea had made other men of us.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Puddimore tentatively inquired about the re-filling of his bottle of cider. It was an old champagne bottle. Each of us had brought one out for his own consumption. Ours lay half-finished under the hedge, covered over, by Puddimore's advice, with grass lest a thief might find it while we were away in the house.

"Do you mean to say you've finished that already?" asked Cruikshank.

He looked at the bottle sadly and turned it upside down.

"Well, do you think you deserve it?" said Cruikshank.

"No, surr, 'twas a foolish thing to have done to drop they reins in the cogs, but I told 'ee when 'ee was buying the machine at the sale, 'twas no good 'un, though 'ee got it cheap. They new machines have their cogs in a box, and nothin' can get at 'en. I were a damned fool, surr—blast the reins—but 'twill be a hot day for an empty bottle."

"Do you mean to say you want that bottle kept filled all day?"

"Come haymakin' time, surr, Mr. Sniff gave me awng the cider I could drink. Doan't 'ee sweat it out as fast as 'ee put it in? 'Ee can't work haymakin' dry, surr. The grass cuts better with

Puddimore Acts Suspiciously

the dew on it, and a man, he'll work twice as weng with a drop of sweat on his forehead."

Cruikshank took the bottle without another word and brought it to the cider store. I have never known him be able to refuse a man with a touch of philosophy in him. I must confess it would have gone hard with me to refuse him myself. Already it had become the burning day it promised. The cogwheels were cleared. Work was ahead of us, and the immediate prospect of a hearty breakfast.

Spleen is a good thing when all the world has gone wrong as it had with us early that morning. But a man who taints his application of justice with it makes a sour thing of life.

"Here you are. Take your breakfast," said Cruikshank, handing him the bottle, full to the neck— "And don't you ask me for another drop till we've got a dozen lines of swathes lying down in that field."

I should like to be able to describe the look in Puddimore's eye. It was more than a twinkle. It was a glitter as of one who has contracted a fine bargain or found something he had scarcely dared to look for.

"He's a fine genklemung," he muttered again to me as Cruikshank turned away, and then I

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

knew that Cruikshank's appreciation of that compliment was correct. He meant that Cruikshank was a damned fool, but one whose folly it were well to profit by.

It was while we were upstairs, sluicing our faces with cold water before breakfast, that Cruikshank called me peremptorily to his room.

"Come here, A. H.!" he shouted, "Come here as quick as you can!"

I ran with the towel in my hands and the cold water dripping from my face.

He pointed out of the window, saying, "What's he doing? Watch him. What's he doing?"

It was Puddimore, with all ostentation, busily engaged in trying a spare set of knives, with the horned flesh of his old thumb, but obviously more engaged in looking at the windows of the house.

"Can he see us from there?" I asked.

"Not if we keep well behind these curtains. He's up to something. If ever a man was guilty of premeditation, there he is."

Certainly every movement he made was suspicious. There was no more sense in his fingers to the sharpness of those blades, or if there were, it conveyed no impression to his mind. He was intent upon some other purpose, a purpose plainly enough affected by observation from the house.

Puddimore Acts Suspiciously

If the walls have ears, then certainly every window of a house is an eye to a man who has some guilty project in his mind. But Puddimore's histrionic abilities which had been of a superior quality at that moment when he began our hay-making in the "Shilshard" field, were distinctly inferior now. He was trying to pretend he was busily engaged upon a definite purpose, yet never did a man appear more preoccupied in his life.

Having apparently satisfied himself that we were all downstairs at breakfast—seeing his own habits, it was so far cute of him to realise that we might have gone upstairs for a wash—he laid down the mowing-knife, and walked slowly out of the farmyard.

"Come on! Into Bellwattle's room," muttered Cruikshank; "We shall be able to watch him from there."

He was not in sight when first we arrived at Bellwattle's window, but presently he appeared, walking slowly, leisurely, with his head bent, but as one who might well be listening intently for the sound of footsteps behind him.

"Where's he going?" I asked.

"To the hayfield," said Cruikshank, with the triumph of discovery.

"But what for?" I inquired. I have not got

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Cruikshank's capacity for the *flair*. There was no illumination for my intelligence at that moment. I was thinking of his mishap with the reins, wondering if they could have something to do with it.

Cruikshank laughed.

"You think it over," said he, "while we have breakfast, and if you haven't got it by then, I'll show you later."

"You're not going to follow him?"

"No—no need to."

Well—I thought it over. All through breakfast I was silent while they talked of the work they could get through before sunset, of how many could be spared from the house to come and help, of where they should have tea in the fields, and whether it were better or no to come into lunch or have it brought out in a basket.

"Are you ready now, A. H.?" asked Cruikshank, lighting his pipe.

"Ready for anything," said I, and we went out together.

As we walked across to the hayfield, I thought he must have forgotten about Puddimore in the more absorbing interest of the work that lay in front of us.

Taking off our coats and hanging them on the hedge, he asked me then suddenly whether I had

Puddimore Acts Suspiciously

thought out the mystery of Puddimore's movements.

"Was it anything to do with the machine?" I suggested, feeling I was particularly dull that morning, and attributing it to the unexpected hour of rising.

"A. H.," said he solemnly, "I think you know a good deal about women. Sometimes it seems to me you understand Bellwattle better than I do. But I'm damned if you know anything about men."

And with that he stooped down, picking up our two cider bottles from under their covering of grass. They were both as dry as bones.



Chapter XXII

PUDDIMORE EXPLAINS

*"I see a tramp man, surr,
come along the road."*



THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XXII

PUDDIMORE EXPLAINS



LACING the bottles back again Cruikshank hid them beneath their cover of grass, and we went away to the machine to make a final examination. The patience of the woman in Bellwattle, picking away with that hatpin of hers for more than a hour, had removed every trace of rope from the congested cogwheels. All was ready for the fresh start, and once that was fairly made, there was nothing but the endurance of the horses and the willingness of the driver to interfere with the best part of the field being cut that day.

While we were standing there, Puddimore came out with Short and Prince. Everything was put ready again, and for the second time that morning the launch was made, but it was not so effective as before in those early hours. The cloud of seed and pollen could scarcely be seen in that bright light. There was no sudden breaking of the

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

moving stillness. By that time the land was awake. There was the note of other mowing machines on the neighbouring farms, the sound of their voices muted by distance as they shouted to their horses turning at the meadow's edge.

However, it was exciting enough, seeing our Juggernaut start off well, with that clear, rhythmic shurr of the knives, and the steady falling of the mown grass. So exciting was it, that for the moment we forgot all about the cider. The first corner had to be turned. We should know fairly by then how the horses were going to work together. So much of the success of the haymaking depended upon that, and except for the auctioneer's guarantee of their capabilities in a mowing machine when he bought them, Cruikshank knew nothing of their willingness in harness.

Farther and farther in the distance of the field, Puddimore, bobbing up and down on his iron seat, sunk down below the horizon of the high-grown grass. By the time he had reached the end, he was, as they would say of a ship, hull down. Almost we held our breath to listen. The hum of the knives deepened as he slowed down. It ceased altogether. Then we heard his voice raised to exasperation as he shouted to the horses.

"He's got off," said Cruikshank. "Something's

Puddimore Explains

wrong. They won't work together, or there's something the matter with the machine. How the devil are we going to cut seventy-five acres at this rate! My God! Here's the weather and everything splendid and we're going to be hung up like this!"

He was taking it terribly seriously. There was a deep and moving note of tragedy in his voice. It might have been the Day of Judgment, and he unprepared to meet it.

Behind the machine, standing on the ground, we could see Puddimore dragging violently at the horses, heeling them back and shouting at the top of his voice.

"He's getting on again," said I, irresistibly responding to the fever of the moment. And sure enough he had mounted his iron seat once more. We saw him crack the reins, we heard the regular whirr of the knives again as he started down the other side, and Cruikshank drew a deep breath of relief.

At the second corner there was a delay, and again at the third. Each time he had to dismount either to clear the knives or get the horses into position. But at last he came round again to where we stood and there was a wholly unjustified look of triumph on his face.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I realised then that none of this play-acting would he have indulged in had he been working for an experienced farmer. He was just doing his job, neither well nor ill, and a farmer would have cursed him up hill and down dale for stopping then, just when he had got the horses going nicely.

But Puddimore knew his Cruikshank for a fine "genklemung," and he stopped to get his meed of praise with the usual accompaniment to wash it down.

"There be the first round of your first field, surr," said he, as he dismounted and, with a face wearing the innocence of a child, walked to the hedge to get his bottle of cider.

I waited for Cruikshank to curse him back to his seat. But that—first round of his first field—had done the trick. He was mighty pleased. I could see it in his face.

"Are they going to go all right together?" he asked of the horses.

"After I've had a round or two with they beasts," said Puddimore, "there won't be no two horses in the place to touch 'em. They'ng go together sweet as two children, they'ng go. I've had deangings with horses awng me life. What I doan't know 'bout horses ain't worth no man

Puddimore Explains

telling 'ee. You give me time, surr, and I'll have awng they acres cut and made into finer hay as ever 'ee did see. When I were at Berkngney Castle——”

Cruikshank apparently had heard much of his agricultural exploits at Berkeley Castle, and there being a limit to which self-praise is sufferable, the remembrance of the empty cider bottles came suddenly into his mind. Concealing a wink for my benefit, he went to the hedge, and fetched out our two bottles, saying as he did so—“Well, we'll all have a drop and wish it success.”

I stole a glance at Puddimore. His expression was as bland as a child's, and he raised his bottle to his lips, tilting it up to help him keep it so.

Cruikshank's astonishment at his discovery was simulated in a masterly manner.

“Why—they're empty!” he exclaimed.

Puddimore kept his bottle tilted.

“They're empty, Puddimore!” Cruikshank repeated.

Puddimore lowered his bottle and looked across at us.

“Empty?” said he; “Why, how be that?”

“I don't know how it be,” replied Cruikshank,

“But there it is. Both of 'em. Dry as a bone.”

Laying down his bottle on the grass, Puddimore

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

came across with gradually awakening interest and carefully examined the corks.

"I was wondering might it be they leakin' out, surr," he suggested.

"Leaking—! How could they? The corks were in as tight as a drum."

He took one of the bottles in his hand, as a detective might examine an object found upon the scene of a murder. Then he looked mysteriously all about the field.

"Who do you think had it?" asked Cruikshank. "It's been stolen. There's no doubt about that."

Puddimore beetled his brows and thought it all out with consummate care.

"The boys do be gettin' in, surr, through the gaps and holes. These hedges want mendin'—bad they want mendin', and I must see to 'em, soon as this hay be cut. I've mended hedges awng me life. If you want a hedge mended, you can't get a better man——"

That herring was not strong enough of scent for Cruikshank. He kept to the trail.

"I want this thing explained," said he; "I'm not going to have thieves on my farm. You were about the place while we were in at breakfast. Didn't you see anyone?"

"I see a tramp man, surr, come along the road

Puddimore Explains

while I was trying they other set of knives. But I were only in the yard an' he went by 'long the road."

"What was he like? Describe him—carefully."

The inventive genius of Puddimore was now being stretched to its uttermost. The perspiration was beginning to stand out on his forehead as, prompted by Cruikshank, he clothed and described in every detail this creature of his imagination.

Simmering with suppressed laughter, I could not help but realise what a thing of training after all the imagination is. His was as rusty and as creaking as an old hinge, yet backwards and forwards Cruikshank bent it, first this way—then that. With superhuman effort, he succeeded in describing in every particular the tramp he had seen going down the road.

"What colour was his hair?" asked Cruikshank.

"He—he had dark hair, surr."

"But I thought you said he wore a cap?"

"An' so he did."

"How could you see the colour of his hair then?"

"Well—surr—" he paused, nearly at a loss he was then but, wriggling till the last, he managed to extricate himself with a fine imaginative contortion—"He took off his cap and he scratched

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

his head as he came by the gate. 'Twas then I saw the colour of his hair."

Cruikshank swallowed in his throat.

"Didn't you follow him to see what he was up to?"

"No, surr. I was busy trying they knives."

"But didn't you see him when you went across to the hayfield?"

"I never said I went across to the hayfield, surr."

"No—you never said so—but I saw you from Mrs. Townshend's window."

There was one moment when I thought he was going to give in. Cruikshank thought so too. We could all feel it in the air about us. He knew then we were quite aware who had taken the cider. Yet in a last courageous effort at the balance of his dignity, he caught hold of the calculation that though Cruikshank had seen him go into the field, he could not, through the screen of the hedge, have seen him actually drinking the cider.

"I went into the field, surr, to get the stone to sharpen one of they spare blades, and now I come to think of it I did hear a sound in the hedge, as would be someone movin'—but I seed no tramp, surr—no—I seed no tramp. If I'd seed the tramp that would ha' made things clear as

Puddimore Explains

daylight. But I'm always for the truth an' can't abide they liars. I seed no tramp."

At times Cruikshank can introduce the look of a gimlet into his eye. He turned it upon Puddimore then, and to give Puddimore his due, I must admit he suffered the process of its piercing into his mind like a Spartan. Never once did he flinch, and when Cruikshank burst out laughing, I'm damned if he did not laugh as well.

"Oh! get back on to your machine," said Cruikshank, "and let's have some work done and less talk about it. When you've got a dozen swathes cut round the field, we can begin to talk about haymaking."

Still bearing the pride of innocence in his face, Puddimore arranged his grass cushion, mounted his seat and started off.

Once again we watched his old, round shoulders bobbing up and down in the waves of the grass. To me, as I took the impression from his departing figure, he was like an old and crafty dog who had stolen a bone, and just got away with it in time before he had been found out. He knew; both of us knew well enough, he would have all the sympathy of Bellwattle when the tale came to be told in the house. She loves an adventurer. She has a soft corner in her heart for the canny thief.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

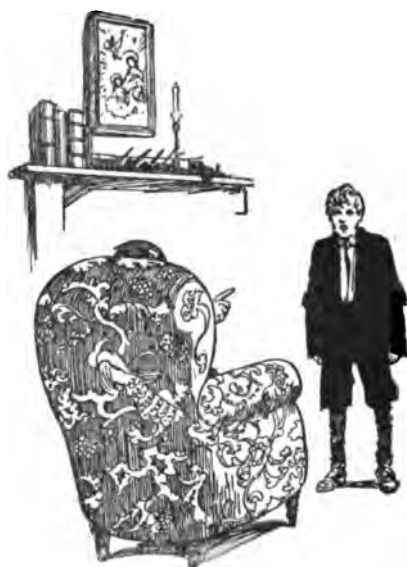
I don't know why the deuce she married Cruikshank.

For the rest of that day the horses worked like brothers together. Half the field of hay was lying prostrate, with flocks of pigeons busy at their evening meal, before the sun dropped down behind the Mendip hills.



Chapter XXIII

GREAT DAYS



*"Cruikshank from his
armchair was gratui-
tously offering him
words of wisdom."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION

CHAPTER XXIII

GREAT DAYS



VERYBODY from the boot-boy upwards was called out of the house into the fields to help in the hay-making. It is the only kind of work outside their sphere to which I have ever seen servants come willingly. Little wonder can be found for that. Strenuous as the work may be, it is a holiday for them, a holiday, moreover, out of which there is generally some profit to be made. The first completed rick and the last, no less, are moments when the farmer feels generously disposed towards everyone.

It was the boot-boy, as I remember him, who left his labours most willingly of all; as well, it was the boot-boy who did least work of any of them. He was the laziest and dirtiest little imp I had ever come across. More out of sympathy than conviction, Cruikshank had given him a job in the house. He was an orphan, living in

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

the neighbourhood in the care of his aunt, a decent, respectable, spinster woman who had taken him out of charity, and was far too sweet of nature and mild of temper to ever bring up with success a young devil like that.

Applying for his situation herself, she had told Cruikshank she found him a bit of a handful, and would be thankful indeed, if he got a good job where he would be kept in order. Having that same *flair* for the training of dogs, no less than for the upbringing of children, Cruikshank took him on at once.

"I'll look after him," said he in that firm tone of voice which always brings conviction whenever he uses it and, on this occasion, sent the spinster aunt away with a heavy load lifted from her mind.

But she did not know Bellwattle's Cruikshank, and had had no word with Bellwattle on the matter. She did not know that the *flair* with Cruikshank is a guttering business, somewhat like a candle in its expiring moments; very bright while it lasts, but apt to die right out into darkness.

For the first week or so, certainly, Cruikshank kept an eye on him; had him occasionally into his study when he began to show signs of slackness, and read him what I am sure were most excellent homilies on the vice and folly of idleness.

"I'll make something of that boy yet," said he—but Cruikshank is the creative temperament. He makes something of so many things. I have known him buy a bench, a whole expensive set of carpentering tools and, in a heated enthusiasm begin to work on the repairing of old furniture. When he had mended the veneer on a mahogany chest of drawers with wood he had obtained from an old cigar box, I have seen him close the door of his carpentering shed, and never enter it again for weeks. He takes his chaff well on these matters from Bellwattle, who, when she can be persuaded to do a piece of work will not lift her head till it is finished. They dovetail well together, for while they last there is always the varied interest of his enthusiasms, and at the time they are so intense as to convince everyone, even Bellwattle, that there is really something in them.

His energy about training that boot-boy was the same as all his other enthusiasms. For the first few weeks he gave great attention to it.

"I've had no child of my own," said he; "but I think I'd know how to bring him up if I had one."

And there, I believe him. The only difficulty with this boy was that he was no child of Cruikshank's, and the mainspring of his enthusiasm lies in his affections. He never started with any

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

for that boy, and I am not surprised. Once a thing is deep in Cruikshank's heart, my own opinion is that it stays there. If it is only in his pocket—as was this boy with his weekly wage—it stands as much chance of remaining there as does a three-penny bit.

Nevertheless, for the first fortnight or so, he gave him a fair share of his attention. Coming into his study one morning, I found the youth standing, scarcely at ease, while Cruikshank from his armchair was gratuitously offering him words of wisdom.

"Don't think what your work is worth, till you've done it," said he. "Work half done is worse than ill-finished. If you find some pride in cleaning a pair of boots now, you'll put your heart in the right place for doing a man's work when you're older, and a man and his work that's all there is to him in this world. He's a poor thing without it."

No doubt it was all very sound, for Cruikshank had that inherent honesty of meaning intensely every word he said. But I saw a grin behind that boy's hand as he left the room upon my arrival, and knew that every word of it had been wasted.

"You'll never make anything of that youth," said I; "You're only wasting your breath."

"I don't believe anything's wasted," he replied, confirmed in his idealism. "If it doesn't feed the fish in the river, it'll reach the fish in the sea."

He was giving little food to the fish in the river when three weeks had well gone by, and the hay-making had begun. For after the first few days out in the fields, it was brought to his notice that the boot-boy was seizing this change of work as an opportunity for the most flagrant idleness. He was doing nothing at all, and into the bargain contriving to obtrude himself in everybody's way.

I was there in the "Shilshard" meadow when Cruikshank called him over and gave him home truths that did not chose their steps to find the patches of philosophy.

"You're a good-for-nothing, dirty little hound!" he shouted at him. "What you want is a good, stout strap across your back till you show the place that smarts most, and then have it laid on again."

And that was better talk it seemed to me than all the soundest philosophy in the world. There was no grin behind that youngster's hand then. He stood there shivering in his shoes.

"Does your aunt ever give you a thrashing?" asked Cruikshank.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"No," said the boy.

"Never once?"

"No."

"Have you ever had a thrashing in your life?"

"No, sir."

"That's just what I should have imagined. Well the sooner you learn what it feels like as an alternative to a little honest work the better for you, my lad. We learn things by contrasts in this world, and when you've had a strap across your back you'll know whether it's nicer than doing your duty."

I fancy the boy thought he was going to get his leathering then and there, for his cheeks blanched, and his body seemed to shrivel inside his skin.

But there is in Cruikshank—I have often noticed it—a passion for justice, and a strict observance of the rights of the individual.

Hot though his temper was on this occasion, he was yet conscious he had no right of chastisement over this young limb of the devil. The boy was his servant, not his slave. There was none of the Feudal Lord in Cruikshank.

"You go home this evening," said he—"after work's over and ask your aunt whether she'll accord me permission to give you a good thrashing.

She can come along and see me about it if she likes, and I'll tell her why."

We were building the second rick that evening; carrying the hay up from the Crooked Withy meadow in the wagon, nearly a ton at a time, to the rickyard behind the cowshed.

Those were peaceful journeys. Restful interludes between the strenuous labour of loading and unloading, when the one who had built the load reclined full-stretched on the summit in the softest, sweetest of beds and swaying and swinging as the wagon rolled along, lay looking up into the blue sky. Those moments of peace were worth all the fatigue of the day.

For this loading business is not such a simple job as it looks. Any visitor coming in to lend a hand, if he is a novice at it, will make a hopeless mess of the whole affair; load half as much as a practised hand, and probably spill the lot before the rick is reached.

You must build your corners stout and strong. Each load is a piece of architecture in itself, and without the surest of foundations is worse than any house ill-built upon the sand.

The pale-faced youth who, before the hay-making was over, stepped into the boot-boy's shoes when he had vacated them, unwisely boasted

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

he knew something about the job. He was set on to perform it forthwith, and was presented with such forkloads as made us stagger beneath the weight of them.

But he had framed his corners weak, and there was but insecure foundation for the wealth of building material we brought him. Higher and higher his structure grew, becoming more and more of a pyramid, and less and less of a castle wall. Tread it down as he might, with every forkload there was less room on top. It was becoming a dizzy business, and with a timid voice he called out from the summit that he thought we had got enough.

"Eh—lad—she'll carry more'n that," shouted Puddimore, with a moist twinkle in his eye. And up went another forkful. It was true enough the wagon would carry more and the haymaker saves himself all the journeys that he can. But as that boy had built her, she was becoming like the leaning tower of Pisa. There was no place for another wisp but on the very pinnacle.

By the time his white face, giddy on the top, was peering down at us, begging for mercy, we turned the horses home and walked alongside, cheered by the sight of him trying to keep his seat.

"Doan't 'ee be a fool lad!" called out Puddi-

more, with chuckles of laughter—"Let 'ee lie down and stretch 'ee arms and legs out wide, and say 'ee prayers to Almighty God, for 'tis a parlous place 'ee have up there."

The wretched boy did as he was bid and there, on the pinnacle of the hay, he lay as one crucified to save the load.

It was of no avail. We came to a part of the field where the land flowed in long continuous waves. Down into the trough of them lurched the wagon like a great ship overburdened with her bellied sail, fast riding to her doom.

The first she weathered; but it was easy to see she could not hold the storm for long. Motionless and rigid that crucified figure lay on top of his pyramid, not even daring to raise his head lest the balance of the load should be upset.

"Stick to it!" we shouted to him, "Stick to it—!" and one and all of us were holding our sides with laughter, not caring now that we should have the extra work if the ship of our labours were wrecked before she came to port.

There came a wave at last, one mightier than the rest. Down into the trough she went, reeling in her agony—up towards the summit of the next! Then she heeled over. Far away up in those heights of air came the sound of a frightened voice,

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

crying out like an auctioneer in heaven, "I'm going—I'm going! I know I'm going!"

Then he was gone. The whole edifice crashed and out of the *débris* of new-mown hay there crawled the whitest face of human being I have ever seen.

But they were grand days! The heat, the scent, the healthy labour of it all. What nights to get into one's bed with the evening light scarce faded, and a great moon coming up with its lamp into the deep steel blue of sky!

You forget the hay-dust in your hair, and if there were many a drop of sweat that ran down your face, there is always the memory of that cool bottle of cider lying in the shadow of the hedge to wash it away.

I had asked for hazard and adventure in my change of life—well, there is both, even in a hay-field. You are pitting your strength in scarce more than single combat against the land, and your lists are glorified in your memory as with all the glamour and the perfume of the East.



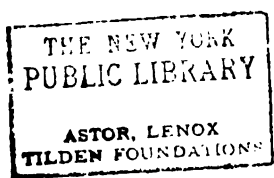
Chapter XXIV

ADVICE TO FATHERS



"There has always appeared to me something ludicrous in a father taking his child in cold blood to his study apart."





CHAPTER XXIV

ADVICE TO FATHERS



UT I have gone ahead in my memories. The boot-boy incident is not complete, and there is no doubt it had a completeness, peculiar though it may have been

to the family of Bellwattle and Cruikshank.

For the next few days, after that interview in the hayfield, the boot-boy kept in the background, and when seen, was observed to be working like a nigger at his job.

Happening to come before his notice about three days later, Cruikshank asked him if he had spoken to his aunt.

"That's a nuisance," said the boy; "I forgot about it."

"Well—make it a convenience," replied Cruikshank—"and go and tell her to-night."

He spoke like a Roman father, yet nevertheless I detected a twinkle in his eye as he turned away.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

I wondered then what would be the end of it, and wondered still more with increasing interest when the next morning I saw the aunt, in black bonnet with jet quiverings, being escorted across the hall to Cruikshank's study.

I carried the news to Bellwattle, who declared the whole matter was ridiculous.

"It's no good his thrashing the boy," said she; "I don't believe in corporal chastity."

I corrected her for her own sake lest one day she might voice those sentiments before the vicar.

"You mean chastisement," said I.

"Whatever I mean," she replied—"It's silly."

About ten minutes later, Cruikshank entered the room with the most humorous and at the same time woebegone expression on his face I have ever seen.

"What's the best way to give a thrashing," said he, "because upon my soul I've forgotten."

"Has she given her consent?" asked Bellwattle.

"Given her consent? She's positively delighted. I might have been asking her acceptance of a five-pound note."

The situation by now was plain enough to anyone who knew their Cruikshank. Wilfully closing his eyes to all possible humour in the case he had preferred his temper while wrath was fresh

in him at finding how his training of the boot-boy had produced no more than the grossest idleness.

Nothing will incense a man more than finding that the scattering of his seeds of wisdom have yielded no more than weeds. For this reason must clergymen and schoolmasters be ranged in the objectionable classes until upon acquaintance they have proved themselves superior to their environment.

The type of man a clergyman cultivates is he who will obtain a way to heaven. The type of boy a schoolmaster upholds is he who will win a scholarship. Both types, if according to the text, are positively obnoxious, and to spend one's life cultivating them is to let the bloom of one's heart run to seed in that self-centred anxiety that the strain may not be lost.

Nature takes care of these things for herself it seems to me, and too much scrupulousness on the part of man for his soul is apt to lead to a barren tree.

There had, no doubt, been that academic spirit in the temper of Cruikshank when he had conceived the appropriateness of giving the boot-boy a thrashing. Now there is no sense of humour in propriety. Without doubt, Cruikshank had preferred his temper. But, thank heaven, he is one who cannot be appropriate for long. In the inter-

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

val that had elapsed, and while his temper had had time to cool, the ridiculousness of the situation was predominant.

There has always appeared to me something ludicrous in a father taking his child in cold blood to his study apart, standing by while the wretched little fellow divests himself of those garments which give him what little dignity he has, then compelling him to submit to the further indignity of bending himself over a chair, exposing that little naked part of his anatomy which in common decency he would far rather was not seen, while his father, a tall, strong man, and many years his senior, without stay or hindrance, exerts himself to inflict such pain as in the circumstances the under-housemaid could accomplish with but the slightest effort.

Some such picture as that must have come, in his cooler moments, to Cruikshank's mind. The time to have given that boot-boy a thrashing was when he was in the temper for it, there and then without the judicial hesitancy of calculation. That refusal to give a boy a thrashing in the moment of one's wrath, lest blind and chill justice should be overstepped, is a confession on the part of a full-grown man that he has little or no control over himself.

Advice to Fathers

I speak with experience—and not as the Jews—and if fathers who would earn the respect of their sons—a quality worth having from little boys and not easily won—would cuff them over the head, or inflict what bodily pain they thought fitted the crime in the moment of their wrath at its discovery, they might do better in that difficult and responsible position in which it has pleased God to call them.

Such as it is worth, this advice is only for fathers. Clergymen and schoolmasters, as I have intimated, are in a class by themselves.

Cruikshank was up against this problem now. His wrath had evaporated, and humour was doing its best to save him from loss of dignity.

"I can't take that little beast into my study," said he, "and give him a thrashing now."

"You'd laugh," said Bellwattle.

"I should," said he; "and how the devil can you give a boy a thrashing when you're laughing all the time. I can't play golf when I'm laughing. I take my eye off the ball. I might miss him altogether once out of thrice. And what a fool he'd think me then."

"It comes to this," I suggested, "that you're afraid of losing your dignity in the eyes of that rotten little boot-boy."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"For the matter of that," he replied, "the world's full of rotten little boot-boys, and every man jack of us goes about in fear and trembling, lest our dignity be lost in their presence. All right, A. H., you're not in my shoes. You come along to the study and see me shamed before a rotten little boot-boy."

I went with him, chuckling, and we waited while the youth was sent for. He came, with a scared face, peering round the corner of the door. Whether he had had speech with his aunt or not, he knew well what was in the air.

"Shut the door," said Cruikshank sternly, and then had to turn his face away to look out of the window.

The boot-boy shut the door.

With an effort Cruikshank pulled himself together.

"Your aunt has granted her permission," he began, "for me to give you a good sound thrashing."

By a slight movement from one foot to another, it was plain to see how that part of his anatomy, sensitive to even a hint of these undertakings, twitched at the sound of the words.

"But it's my opinion that a thrashing in cold blood is not going to do you much good. You're

Advice to Fathers

the sort of little fool who would consider himself injured by the mere taste of justice. You've forgotten by now how lazy you were when I threatened you with it, and you'll think the punishment ill-deserved. What you want is a beating on the spot and that, the very next time you shirk your work, you'll get, and I can tell you it'll sting a bit more on account of my temper. Go on—get out! Get to your work and the next time you'll know what to expect."

I don't know whether the little beast heard Cruikshank's laughter as the door closed. I have suspicion that he did, and believed there was no such thing as a thrashing for him in that house. As far as that goes, he was quite right. He became incorrigible and Cruikshank sacked him. The pale-faced youth who had a taste for painting little pictures and the breaking of good old English china came in his stead.



Chapter XXV
A SOLOMON COME TO
JUDGMENT



*"I don't think Peggy had
different treatment from the
rest."*

**THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

**ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION**

CHAPTER XXV

A SOLOMON COME TO JUDGMENT



CORPORAL punishment, however, was by no means outside Cruikshank's administration. In the reign of the pale-faced youth, indeed in its very beginning, someone brought word one day to the Court that the old blacksmith's pet white cat had been killed by our dogs.

Now cats, as is well known, were close to Bellwattle's heart. She had possessed five in Ireland. At Lemington, there was but one, christened Ugly—because of its black countenance—and when in favour—which it always was, and mostly after acts of theft—called Ugetty-pug.

Bellwattle had no sympathy for the dogs over this affair, and Cruikshank had forthwith gone down to the forge to investigate.

The blacksmith was an elderly man of patriarchal appearance; practically deaf and as nearly blind. He met Cruikshank with the limp body

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

of the white cat in his arms, whimpering that it was his sole companion.

“Every evening her came and sat on my knee after her saucer o’ milk, surr—every evening these last ten years. I doan’t know what’ll I do wi’out her, my wife bein’ dead now and buried there in the churchyard, and my darter lookin’ after me, both her hands she hev full o’ work, and I’m too old to lift a hammer now—too old, there’s no mistake about that.”

There was none indeed. His forge was idle, a litter of rusty iron with cold black ashes on the furnace. Every Friday a young blacksmith from a neighbouring village came over to do whatever work was needed by the farmers in the village. You could not look at this old fellow with the body of that white cat in his arms and not pity him.

There is no assessment of Charity in these affairs. The quality of your heart is the only competent judge to make out the bill. The value of the cat was immaterial. I have no opinion of the man who could judge it by that. There was no valuing the matter by any known computation. The loss was that sustained by the old blacksmith’s sentiments, a commodity upon which our modern materialists place less value than a brass

A Solomon Come to Judgment

farthing. It was no good calculating how much of his grief was assumed, or how much of it genuine. In an affair of this nature, the amount of charity is determined by what your imagination assures you you would suffer yourself, and if the gratitude of the recipient of your bounty is any criterion of the sum, I suppose Cruikshank believed he must have suffered considerably.

Having then paid handsomely for this charity thus forced upon him, I can quite understand his next thought being to serve out justice to the dogs.

But who was the culprit? By all accounts the whole lot of them had been caught in the act of chasing and, in the *mêlée*, it was impossible to see who had delivered the *coup de grace*.

"I'll beat every damned one of them," said Cruikshank in his wrath—"Cowardly little beasts!"

And at the sound of his voice, no less than the Solomon-like measure of his judgment, Bellwattle's face fell. She could not, however, withdraw from her attitude in the matter. One of them had killed the cat, and she was compelled to suppose it would be unfair to beat one for the lot without being certain of its guilt.

"They won't know what you're beating them

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

for," she said, in the last faint hope that retribution might be averted.

"They'll know," said Cruikshank, "when they see the body of the white cat."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I've brought it back from the blacksmith's and I'm going to show it to each one of them before I beat it. You can bury it in the garden afterwards if you like."

Bellwattle turned sadly away and departed to her bedroom, the farthest spot from the scullery, which was chosen as the place of chastisement.

Cruikshank went to fetch a stick. He had a laborious business in front of him. There were five dogs. Peggy, a collie—Dick—Roy, one of Peggy's puppies, and Puppy, yet another, so impoverishedly christened because, presenting them with a litter of twelve, their ingenuity for names had become exhausted.

Holding the body of the white cat in his hands, the pale-faced youth was instructed to stand in the scullery like an acolyte bearing the insignia of all unchivalrous action. Then the dogs were brought in, one by one, in the reverse order to that in which I have named them.

In their ignorance of the fate that awaited them, there was no difficulty in catching Puppy.

A Solomon Come to Judgment

A hulking great collie she was then, just a year old. There was a general suspicion that she was more or less the village idiot of the family. Even at that age, she gambolled and frolicked foolishly, and took her beating like the clown in a circus. Her antics in response to Cruikshank's blows—and they were no mean ones—might have been intended to make us laugh. She had all the appearance of laughing herself. As little did she appreciate the meaning of the body of the white cat.

"Oh—take her away!" said Cruikshank at last, feeling he was in danger of regaining his temper with her humours. "Roy'll have a better sense of the fitness of things."

Roy was a fine sable collie, looking like a lion, the finest dog of his kind it would be possible to find, and wearing that expression of uncertain temper one hears credited to collies, but so seldom finds.

Swiftly learning what he was in for, he ruffled up his dignity in bristles on his back. I did not envy Cruikshank his job just then, but he got him firmly by the collar and gave him the soundest thrashing because there was just the chance of being bitten to keep his temper on edge. Roy growled and showed his teeth, but he never whined, and he walked away with as much dignity

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

as he had come in, assuring us he did not care a damn, and that nothing Cruikshank could do would hurt him.

Then there was Dandy, and by this time with all the accounts that had gone about the house, he was sore afraid and very difficult to find.

Cruikshank offered me the stick, feeling, I suppose, I had some proprietary right but I felt the affair had better go on as it had begun, and went out to find Dicky for the measurement of justice.

When I came back, I was informed Dandy had taken his thrashing with a stoical calm. True he lay down to it, and offered that part of himself it was most difficult to strike. But he had never uttered one cry from beginning to end. I took occasion when Cruikshank was not looking to pat him gently as he sadly left the room.

He glanced up at me from under his eyes and he said—

“I never knew it mattered about cats—foul-mouthed little beasts! I know why you went out of the room—don't think I didn't appreciate that.”

I patted him again whereupon I saw him running back to the others with a slight wagging of his tail. I expect he told them it did not hurt at all.

It was Dicky who yelled and Bellwattle, though

A Solomon Come to Judgment

she was as far away as she could get, no doubt having her ears well ready for the faintest sound to reach them, sent down a swift message that Peggy on no account was to be hurt.

"She's an old lady—" were the words she asked to be particularly repeated in her message.

But I don't think Peggy had any different treatment than the rest. The only difference lay in the way she took it. She was the oldest dog of the family, and with wonderful energy she had presented them with twenty-two puppies in her day. Called alternately the old lady, or Princess—for no dog gets it right name in that household—she knew she was the favoured one, and that Cruikshank adored her.

I must confess I admired the way he showed no favouritism. Peggy received her beating in earnest. But the way in which she persistently refused to believe it was corporal punishment must have been disconcerting to Cruikshank. With arch and almost skittish movements, she sidled under the blows that fell on her, and when it was all over, putting up her paw to shake hands with Cruikshank and congratulate him for a creditable piece of play-acting where she was concerned, he took her in his arms and kissed the soft part of her nose.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

She ran off with fat capers, bounding from one side to the other, convinced that it had all been a put-up job. The others might have been beaten, but she was an old lady, and upstairs, somewhere in the house was a gentle friend of hers who would see that no harm would ever come to her.

"It's all right, you dogs," said she; "he never meant anything. Let's go out hunting this evening."

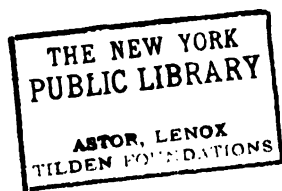
I have it on record that they did. I also have it on record how Bellwattle urged in their defence that after a beating like that they deserved a little amusement.



Chapter XXVI
BONNY CONVEYS A PROTEST



"It comes back to me often with inward quivers of laughter, the remembrance of that day when they tried to put the old cart-horse, Bonny, in the plough."



CHAPTER XXVI

BONNY CONVEYS A PROTEST



I CANNOT number my memories of those days at Lemington Court. Incidents return to the summons of odd moments of suggestion. What the psychologist would call a—subliminal uprush. Often Clarissa finds me, without apparent rhyme or reason, breaking out into sudden and unexpected chuckles of laughter. At times it may be, I seem not to have heard what she says. I sit looking out across the tops of the plane trees we can see from our window and make no reply.

With a jerk then I precipitate myself into the moment of the present as the sound of her voice reaches me. It has reached me over the tops of other than the planes; it has reached me over the elms and apple trees, over the wide hay meadows and the pollard withies where I see that spring with her apple cheeks and that fine young buxom summer laughing one behind the other down the Gloucestershire lanes.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

It comes back to me often with inward quivers of laughter, the remembrance of that day when they tried to put the old cart-horse—Bonny—in the plough.

An acre or so of the Home Meadow was needed by Cruikshank to be turned up for arable. Obviously Short and Prince were the horses for the work, but they were otherwise engaged, and seeing that one may sometimes find as many as five horses to the plough on that heavy land in the valley of the Avon, it appeared hopeless to expect that Bonny and the horse called Desmond, on which Cruikshank rode round the fields in the early morning, could do the work.

There was, however, scarcely more than an acre to be turned, and much against Bellwattle's wishes he made up his mind to put these two on to the job.

"You promised you wouldn't work her hard," said she. "It'll probably strain her heart. She may die while you're at it."

Persuasion, as with most men, only added to Cruikshank's determination. He knew what his own intentions were. No man certainly could be kinder to animals, but the difference between him and Bellwattle is that he likes to see them work. He knew he would be the first to hold up

Bonny Conveys a Protest

his hand against the proceedings were Bonny to show signs of fatigue, therefore all Bellwattle's persuasions availed only to set his mind the more upon doing it.

Bellwattle would like to collect all the old horses in England, keeping them in a field during the summer and in immaculate stables through the winter. Somewhere in her conception of the scheme of life, there is a heaven for all four-legged beasts and feathered creatures and, had she the money, nothing would give her greater satisfaction than to arrange it entirely herself. She has, I believe, many a bone to pick with Nature, and if all were reported of those things she says about God, it would be seen how He comes in for a fair share of her most biting criticism.

She would not go near the Home Meadow that morning when Bonny was being led out to the plough, and when half an hour later word was hastily brought her that the old horse had fallen down in her harness, and could not be induced to rise, she came running out with bitter accusation in her eyes and lips that were trembling with her emotion.

She did not say—"I knew this would happen," but she let one glance fall upon Cruikshank, no less distressed than she was, and then set to work

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

with all her blandishments to persuade Bonny to her feet.

It was to no purpose. Bonny would not move. She lay there with her neck stretched out and her head quite still, resting on the crest of the second furrow they had just completed. Only her eyes turning hither and thither with a clear light in them, gave hope that her last moment was not immediately upon her.

Even I, knowing little or nothing about horses, would have sworn she was not in the last extreme, but there it was, a big beast like that lying stretched upon the ground, apparently unable to move, is a distressing sight to witness. My knowledge of animals amounts to this, that if they will not take their food or are quite incapable of standing on their legs, it is fairly safe to assume there is something the matter with them. What it may be is an affair for the experts. I would sooner diagnose the symptoms of a broken-down sewing machine or give my opinion on a question of plumbing.

Puddimore declared she had the gripes, but associating the gripe (so-called by people in one's childhood, the type of people who had no compunction for the use of such words as itch, and could say stomach without looking uncomfort-

Bonny Conveys a Protest

able about it), associating that complaint with the most violent of agonies, we none of us took the slightest notice of him. His treatment of Daisy had robbed him of all our confidence. Whatever was the matter with Bonny, we wanted no more hanging of old garments on hawthorn hedges. It seemed far too serious a business for that sort of homeopathy.

"Who's got a bicycle to go in for the vet.?" asked Bellwattle, and Cruikshank raised not the faintest word of objection.

When a man has been proved tragically to be in the wrong, his remorse is great enough to warrant your sympathy. I believe he would have given the price of Bonny twice over to have had the poor beast on her feet once more. It was proved to him with a bitter conclusiveness that he had been cruel to a willing animal and was ready to suffer whatever punishment circumstance might inflict upon him for his obstinacy.

I do not wish for a moment here to suggest that it was the sound of the vet.'s name or to convey there was anything out of the ordinary in Bonny's intelligence, but I caught a look in her eye as she lay there, listening, there can be no doubt of that, to everything which was going on about her.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"May I make a suggestion?" said I.

They all looked at me eagerly, as one does towards any unexpected voice offering help in an awkward situation.

"What do you know about horses, A. H.?" asked Cruikshank, sceptical in the bitterness of his heart.

"I don't know anything," I replied; "I say it is only a suggestion."

"Why can't you let A. H. say what he wants to?" demanded Bellwattle and, with childlike obedience, he said no more. "What is it?" she inquired.

"Take all the harness off her—every bit of it—every stitch."

"What's the good of that?" asked Cruikshank; "It's not hurting. We've loosened everything."

I repeated my offer was only a suggestion.

"There's no need to do it if you don't want to," I added. "But just see what will happen—take it off and take it right away, back to the harness-room."

Bellwattle, who at times will take anybody's advice in the world rather than Cruikshank's, began at once to adopt my proposal, and without question. All harness to her was the insignia of slavery, unless it looked particularly smart, or

Bonny Conveys a Protest

had decorations of coloured wool and bells such as they wear on May Day.

In less than five minutes she had Bonny stripped of every stitch, and Puddimore walked away with the harness, looking, with all the falling straps about his shoulders, like a centipede.

We proceeded once more to try and induce Bonny even to a sitting posture, but with no success. There she lay, stretched out pathetically by the plough that had brought her to this distress. Nothing that Bellwattle whispered in her ear, no amount of endearment could persuade her to move.

The only thing that was left to Cruikshank with his pricking conscience, was wrath at the ineffectiveness of my suggestion.

"The harness had nothing to do with it," said he; "I told you we'd loosened every bit of it."

"May I make one more suggestion then," said I; "if that's no good I won't say another word, and you'd better send for the vet. at once."

With tears perilously near her eyes, Bellwattle inquired what it was.

"Fix up Desmond to the plough," said I, "and take it right away."

Cruikshank looked at me in pity, but was too beaten a man to refuse. The plough rattled off

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

to the farmyard, and as it turned out of sight, Bonny raised her head. Before those rattling sounds had come to rest, she had risen to her feet without the assistance of anyone and, looking about her with considerable satisfaction and assurance in her eye, was accepting Bellwattle's caresses and submitting to anything she might chose to do to that soft pouch of flesh beneath her chin.

When Cruikshank returned, sceptical to the last, he stood amazed.

"How did you get her up?" he asked.

"She rose herself," said I, "to announce a protest. She draws the line at a plough."

Bellwattle was laughing now in her sheer delight at the issue, when suddenly she stopped, looking swiftly at Cruikshank. Both of us caught that look. In an instant it had driven all thoughts of Bonny out of our heads.

"What's the matter?" he asked, and came quickly to her, holding her arm.

"A pain—a sudden pain," said she—"in my side." And her face had as swiftly blanched to an unusual pallor that brought a chill to my blood. There was no need to tell us she was in pain. It cried at you from her eyes.

"Come in and lie down," said Cruikshank, gently. "Would you like me to carry you?"

Bonny Conbeys a Protest

She found a smile somewhere in the fund of her sense of humour, and gave it him, but it was a sorry effort, and must have cost her no little.

For a moment I turned away, then followed them at a distance into the house. He took her up to her room, while with many misgivings in my heart, I waited downstairs till he returned.

There was a thin look about his lips and his eyes were as hard and cold as granite.

"Come and help me get out the car," said he in a tone of voice that had no human note of emotion.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Cheltenham," said he—"the doctor."



Chapter XXVII
THE HOOP WITH A
GAP IN IT



*"I wandered out into
the fields."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XXV I

THE HOOP WITH A GAP IN IT



DOUTBLES the sunshine has a quality of its own, the green fields, the blue skies some intrinsic beauty the hand of man cannot disturb; yet I would venture it is alone in the mind of man to find it.

Sunshine, green fields, blue skies, all can be discoloured, and their flaunting beauty weigh upon his spirits the more if it be his heart is in no mood to appreciate them.

Waiting for the doctor to complete his visit to Bellwattle and depart, I wandered out into the fields and down to the Crooked Withy meadow, where not many days before we had cut the hay, a good ton or more to the acre.

With a couple of day's rain, the grass was freshening to a luxuriant green. Here and there on the hedges and the apple trees through the big orchard were still clinging wisps of hay to

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

mark the wake of the wagon where it had carried the loads up to the rickyard, but nothing in the verdant colour of that field would ever have suggested that a harvest had just been gathered there. Already there was keep enough for a good herd of cattle, and left ungrazed, the aftermath would soon be ready for the taking.

Soft white clouds were sailing overhead in their sea of blue. A faint breeze rustled through the leaves of the withies, and sang its pattering song in the high branches of a Lombardy poplar. The river Swillgate wound its twisted way between the crooked banks of the field, here making a mirror for the sky in an open place with a splash of blue, there, smudged with its dark olive browns and greens where the trees hung thickly overhead.

In the meadow on the other bank, cows were grazing, cows white and orange-brown, and some Sussex red, appearing and disappearing beyond the trunks of the withy trees. And in open places where the country stretched to a far distance, there were the blue purple hills, deep-dyed by that light of day, standing between the town of Worcester and the land of Wales.

It was the most perfect day of all since I had been there, yet the thought of Bellwattle up at the house, and the hidden fear in my heart I dare

The Hoop with a Gap in It

not give words to, discoloured everything for my vision.

Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps it discoloured nothing, for all those lights and shades of beauty certainly I saw. It was more as if I were looking at a picture painted upon dead canvas; as though I felt driven in criticism to say aloud—"Yes—all very beautiful—wonderful colours—an arresting conception—but the artist who painted it had no idea of being true to Nature. Nature's not so beautiful as that."

These more closely were the impressions in my mind as I stood there in the Crooked Withy meadow. The beauty of it all was not real to me, and all because of the overburdening sense of something that was far more unhappy than this was happy in my mind.

So it seems to me there are some people who miss the beauty in life altogether, because of the constant overburdening of their minds with the sense of the unreality of beautiful things. I thank Heaven for it that with me, these moods are only transitory. Once the immediate pressure of sadness is relieved, whatever it may be, it falls into the appointed place of sorrows in my memory and they—like the sweetest songs—have power of creating beauty as great as any that I know.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

Whether this be the true analysis of my mind or not, I only know I could not appreciate the beauty of that afternoon, and when I had been sitting on the bank by the stream for a little while, I rose, still ill at ease and went back to the house. Those peacefully grazing cattle, that blue sky, the songs of the trees, the green meadows and the purple hills, they became almost hurtful to me as my eyes rested on them.

I went back and sat in a room where there was no sunshine falling, and waited till Cruikshank and the doctor came down stairs.

They were not long after my return. I heard their footsteps on the uncarpeted oak stairs. I heard them pause in the hall as they stopped and talked. The very sound of their voices was ominous. It was the guttural rumble of men who speak below their breath because of the seriousness rather than the secrecy of what they say.

They were long, those moments, waiting till Cruikshank came to tell me the nature of the doctor's report. When at length I heard him approaching, and at last he opened the door, that grey look was still in his eyes, and he was slow to speech as one who fears to give his thoughts the definite outline of words.

I said nothing as he took a chair and sat for a

The Hoop with a Gap in It

while staring in front of him. After a while he looked up.

"What is it, A. H.," said he; "that makes us feel the abrupt termination of our lives at death, when we haven't a child to carry on after we're gone? It's not the need of someone to leave our property to. I take it a rag-and-bone man feels the same, even if it isn't near enough to his consciousness for words. There must be more than just merely the influence of heredity in one's children. I don't really care a damn whether the qualities I possess—whatever they are—should be perpetuated. I don't think it's myself so much I want to see—though it's the common instinct for a man to want a boy-child—as it is to satisfy that feeling of justification. It seems to me that these flesh and bones of mine will have been such a ludicrous waste of energy, if I don't leave flesh and bones behind me. I've not got ridiculous ideas about the family of Townshend dying out. But I've got violent ideas about myself dying out and not me, mind you, for what I can do, or what I am, but me as some expression of energy that has a just cause rather than having merely been an impediment. Apart from all sentimental ideas about children—and Lord knows I could love one if I had one—I need a child to

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

complete myself. I'm a hoop with a gap in it. I don't go round. I bind nothing."

I felt he was saying all this to himself, rather than to me, the first pardonably egotistical thoughts that overwhelm a man when he is face to face with the direct concern of his fate.

It was easy to gather in rough impression from his moods what had happened, but I wanted more directly to know how Bellwattle fared, and did not hesitate with him to beat about the bush.

He looked up at me then as though he had seen me for the first time since he had entered the room.

"She's got to stay in bed for the next few days," he said, "and if she isn't better then, she has to go to a nursing-home in Cheltenham and be seen by a specialist from London."

"Does she know?" I inquired.

"Yes."

"How's she taking it?"

"Not so much like a brick," said he—"as like a foundation of solid rock. If anybody could keep that child I know she will. When the doctor told her it was greatly up to her, how quiet she could be, and how brave she was, there came that look in her eyes, like she had when she marched out into the hayfield with her hatpin, and picked out the reins from the cogwheels."

The Hoop with a Gap in It

He said that, looking straight at me and then, with a sudden, unaccountable abruptness, he rose from his chair and walked quickly out of the room.



Chapter XXVIII
A GENUFLEXION
OF THE MIND



*"Bellwattle was taken
into the nursing-home
in Cheltenham."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GENUFLEXION OF THE MIND



REFERRING to a simple and common operation necessary to young calves intended to be fattened as steers for the market, Bellwattle once told me they had been exasperated.

"I've no doubt they are," said I solemnly.

"They have been," she corrected me.

"Then I've no doubt they were," I replied.

She looked at me confused.

"Were what?" she asked.

"Exasperated," said I.

"That's what I said," she exclaimed.

"And it's only what I repeat," said I.

She informed me I was remarkably silly sometimes, and talked like a man who has not his fair share of common intelligence.

Poor Bellwattle! I wonder why we use the word—poor—when we want to convey the measure of our sympathy. I have known none so rich as she in qualities of courage and endurance.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

After five days of watching, hoping, but, as far as I know, no praying, Bellwattle was taken into the nursing-home in Cheltenham to await the coming of the specialist from London.

As far as I know, I have said, no prayers passed their lips, for they give no acknowledgment, these two, to the doctrines of religion. They never go to church, but not because they do not believe in God. Rather it is, I should imagine, that they have so vivid and personal conception of the Deity as to believe that the services which are commonly offered Him and the sermons which are commonly preached are like the sycophantic obeisance of an illiterate commoner anxious to make an impression in the presence of Royalty.

"If I'm to continue to believe in God," Cruikshank said once, "I must be allowed to understand His intelligence to be so superior to the nonsense that is mostly talked from pulpits as to be positively offended by it. If I am, how much more so must He be? If I am to continue to believe in God, either the majority of the clergymen I have listened to must be done away with, or I can't go to church. Obviously the former proposition would be unfair, since they are a source of consolation to a good many people. Therefore all that's left me is to stay at home."

A Genuflexion of the Mind

I suppose one naturally drops out of all the forms and ceremonies of religion once one departs from the family pew. Cruikshank told me he had not knelt down to say a prayer for years. But prayer after all is an attitude of the mind, whilst all orthodox religion tends to make it primarily an attitude of the body.

I doubt very much whether in those long nights, wandering near the door of her room, often never going to bed at all, but undressing and slipping on a dressing-gown lest she might call for him and discover his anxiety, I doubt very much whether there were not some attitude of prayer in his mind, even though it may never have reached the obsequious confession of his lips. Indeed I am sure there was, from something that happened later when we were all in Cheltenham.

After she had been at the nursing-home for a few days, it became suddenly imperative for the specialist to be summoned at a moment's notice. He came down to Cheltenham on a Saturday night. An operation had to be performed without delay the next morning at nine.

There was no question about the child being saved now. Details are without purpose. The specialist came to Cruikshank that night after his examination and asked for his wishes in an

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

alternative issue. Performing the operation with least risk to Bellwattle, it would be impossible to save her from childlessness. Taking a risk, that unfortunate condition might be avoided. Which was he to do?

Cruikshank stared at the specialist in astonishment. How could he ask?

"It's my duty to put that question to you," he explained. "I have told Mrs. Townshend——"

"What did she say?"

There was a wrinkle at the corner of the doctor's mouth which at any other time would have been a smile as he replied—

"Well—to repeat her exact words—she said, 'For heaven's sake don't make me nothing—and then I think she laughed. She's a wonderful patient.'"

Cruikshank smiled. I believe he did his best to laugh, but realising it was a risky business, he held it back and told the specialist what he wished. He could have had no "violent ideas" about himself just then.

I stayed with him that night. He undressed and got straight into bed without submitting the attitude of his body to prayer. We talked disjointedly and of nothing but Bellwattle till at last, tired out, he fell asleep.

A Genuflexion of the Mind

There was no sense in avoiding a subject so close to our minds. Even at half-past six when we were wakened, his first words were—

“Three or four hours more and then I shall know. Funny to think one’s lifetime can be pressed into three or four hours. Funny to think one is so near knowing what will happen, and yet be so colossally ignorant.”

“I know she’ll be all right,” said I.

“You can’t know—you can only believe,” he replied.

“Well, don’t you believe?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” said he. “This is the first time in my life I’ve felt my knees give under me. This is the first time in my life I’ve felt I must look outside myself for the determination of Fate, the first time I’ve felt something or someone more sure of the purpose of my existence than I am myself. I can’t lose her—that’s all I keep saying to myself, and possibly it’s that certainty that I can’t which constitutes my belief that I won’t. I don’t believe any more than that. For after all, why shouldn’t I lose her? Other men lose their wives and get through somehow. I couldn’t get through, but what would that matter in the scheme of things where the lives of millions are involved? I wouldn’t hesitate to kill a fly that was

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

crawling over my food, so why should God hesitate to lay His hand upon me?"

In some measure he was giving a true expression to what he felt, but there was the high temperature of fever in it all. I could see his eyes were burning in his head.

At half-past seven the two doctors went to church to Holy Communion on their way to the nursing-home. We walked with them, and at the door of the church we stopped.

"Aren't you coming in?" they asked Cruikshank.

"No—" said he; "I'll meet you up at the Home."

I turned away with him and he began walking up the first street that offered itself.

"Why didn't you go in?" I said; "I think you'd have found it a help."

"Go in," he repeated—"and offer my prayers in a pitiable funk to God! I can't see the justice of that. I'd have given all I know to go in there then with those two men—all I know—but if I have to believe in God, I must have some respect for Him. When you've threatened to give a man the sack, do you like him the better for whining on his knees? Do you withdraw your threat because of the pitiable funk he's in? I shouldn't. Come on—let's go round this way—how long does

A Semiflexion of the Mind

Communion take? We shall be there in time if we walk quick."

That attitude of mind seems to me more like a prayer, more like reverence than any orthodox conception of religious devotion I have certainly heard preached from the pulpit.

I felt I could no longer put my little ideas before him then. Suffering was urging his soul to greater heights of endurance than my mind then had sensation of. At that moment I almost envied him for the pain in his heart.



Chapter XXIX

THE ULTIMATE SURRENDER



*"And then the nurse came in
with that wonderful automatic
cheerfulness of nurses, and said,
'Are you ready?'"*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XXIX

THE ULTIMATE SURRENDER



WONDER is there so much difference between men and women, as men and women would say.

I received a definite impression that morning of Cruikshank in his trial of waiting through the operation as of a woman who must submit to the pains of childbirth. From what he told me of Bellwattle in the last moments he saw her, there was suggested to my mind the courage of a man who goes out with a laugh to battle in a forlorn hope.

The inactivity in the situation of one, the vital taking part in the situation of the other may probably have been the basis of that impression; but I shall never quite think of a man again as wholly wanting in the concern of bringing children into the world.

Every incision of the surgeon's knife cut with that rasping sound into his mind as into her flesh; every drop of blood that was spilled during those

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

two long hours of the operation, oozed in a steady stream from the endurance in his heart. Visibly he weakened as we waited. Visibly he paled with this mental hæmorrhage too deep for any human aid to stem.

As we walked first up one road, then down another close by the nursing-home, waiting during those two hours that were beaten out in single seconds in his brain, he spoke of nothing but her, telling me things most intimate in his heart, which, even to enrich my story, I have no true warrant to repeat.

Sometimes it seemed as if he were scarcely speaking to me at all, but was like a man in his last moments with rambling sentences, telling to himself the little story of his life.

What he told me, however, of their last interview before they parted and how she bore herself, I feel I am at liberty to re-tell; for then, directly he was speaking to me, conscious of his words, and eager to show me how brave a thing she was.

"I don't want them to make me nothing," she said to him, as she had also said to the doctor.

"Nothing!" exclaimed Cruikshank, with a sound in his throat that was like a laugh drenched wet with tears.

"When it comes to the crux, A. H.," he went

The Ultimate Surrender

on, "it's the present that means more than future and past all flung together. Nothing!" He made the same odd noise again. "Of course she's everything. I haven't that courage or clear vision like she has to look ahead, and realise there will be a time, increasing in urgency as the years go on, when I shall want a child and hate and envy those who have them. She can. That's the wonder of her."

"She's not thinking that," said I.

"What's she thinking then?"

"She's thinking of her own justification, her pride in the functions that belong to her, that make her a woman and leave you just a man. If they destroy that power she has, how is she to hold you? How is she better than you? Sex after all is the common determinator, notwithstanding the young novelists who get up, robed in the mantle of realism, and say there is too much harping upon sex in modern literature."

"How is she to hold me, you say," he interposed, refusing to allow his mind to be distracted by my last remark. "Aren't there thousands of things in the lives of men and women without children? I don't think love wears out or needs always the young life coming in between as a link to hold it together. We've been married seven

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

years, and there are memories. Things happen in seven years. The memories that exist between a man and a woman get knotted like cords round them. They may even struggle to get free, but at the critical moment, there's some knot it's impossible to untie, some interweaving of the cords it's impossible to unravel. The very effort to get free, often twines them only closer in the end."

"Marriage, you see," he added, "is an odd business."

"I'm married myself," said I.

"Yes—just married," he corrected. "In respect of the argument, that means nothing. The man who has just married has taken a mistress—no more. It's only later he finds a wife. You don't know half each other's secrets yet. You're still a mystery to her. She's still a mystery to you. Neither circumstance nor events have lifted the veil and showed you to each other just as you are. She doesn't believe you capable of telling a lie. Wait until she finds out that you can. You believe her incapable of deceiving you over the smallest of things. Wait until you find out that she does. Then you can begin to talk about marriage. Marriage isn't a matter of pledges. Oaths don't keep two people of any temper or spirit together. The only true sacrament of

The Ultimate Surrender

matrimony is in people's hearts when, looking at each other with a clear vision they can say—we find no real good in life without each other. The real consummation of marriage is the ultimate surrender, the moment when you can lay your life down like a vessel on the board and say—'It's yours—I trust you to fill it with the sweetest you can find.' Till you come to that, marriage is all priest's talk."

We dropped then for a while into silence as we walked. I was neither disposed to argue, nor capable of denying all he had said. If ever a man knew what was the real sacrament of marriage, it was Cruikshank in those moments while we walked the side streets of the town of Cheltenham.

"How's the hour?" he asked for the twentieth time.

I looked at my watch.

"Twenty-five minutes more," said I, and then he flung out again into a repetition of many things he had said already and forgotten, telling me also for the first time of those last moments he had had with her before her summons to the operating table.

"She was lying down very still when I came into the room," said he, "but immediately she saw who it was, she sat up. I tried to persuade her

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

to keep still, but she wouldn't. She laughed and said she'd have enough of lying down for the next two hours. Have women very meagre imaginations? I believe there was but a faint picture in her mind of all that would soon be happening to her. Yet I know well enough she was not without her fear of the result. You wouldn't have noticed it. You'd have thought her as jolly as a sandboy. But then we're married now. There's no veil. We don't have secrets. We know."

He lit another of the innumerable cigarettes he was smoking and went on.

"It's hard to remember what we talked about, I couldn't have been with her more than five minutes. I know she asked about all the calves, the dogs and the horses, speaking as if she were going to see them again very soon, but revealing as plainly as anything her thought she might never see them again. Anyhow, she was laughing most of the time, and then the nurse came in with that wonderful automatic cheerfulness of nurses and said, 'Are you ready?' as if she were going to have a Turkish bath. She smiled to make it easier for everybody concerned and then, I'm damned if she didn't begin to hum as the nurse helped her on with her wrap. No chloroform for her in bed. They let her choose, but intimated it would be

The Ultimate Surrender

better for her to have it after she'd reached the operating theatre. A theatre! God! I could kill 'em if they don't pull her through. But what do you think she hummed?"

I shook my head.

"I stole the mutton bone, I did,
I stole the mutton bone."

His voice cracked and upon my soul there was something in my throat, I suppose you call it a lump. It was the devil and all to get it down.



Chapter XXX

THE ISSUE




*"In powerlessness we wait
with apathy of body for the
issue of our Fate."*

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XXX

THE ISSUE

OW fast it is possible to live!
How swift, it is inconceivable
to think, this little lamp of our
being can spend its wick upon
the oil of energy when in power-
lessness we wait with apathy of
body for the issues of our Fate!

In two hours, some ten years had passed into the features of Cruikshank's face.

"What will I do?" he said to me thrice and more than thrice during that time in which we were waiting—"What will I do if she doesn't come back!"

It was useless to tell him he would go on with his head up, conscious of the pride in himself that was left him. It was useless. I could say nothing to that question. In the balance of such an issue, no man can believe what he will do till the issue is past.

And then, while we were waiting at the gate

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

of the nursing-home, Bellwattle's nurse came to the front door and beckoned to Cruikshank. I felt the sensation of speed in her gesture and he must have felt it too, for I could realise the blood in his limbs had turned to water as he ran to meet her.

It is a matter of but small concern what I felt those five minutes while he was absent. When he came out he was still an old man—but an old man who has touched his heart's desire.

"I've seen her," he said, "just for one second. She smiled at me——"

He spoke as though he were a lover who, after long months of patient waiting, has won the favour of one kindly glance from his beloved mistress.

I am beginning to understand what he means by the sacrament of matrimony.



Chapter XXXI

THE KEY OF THE CABINET



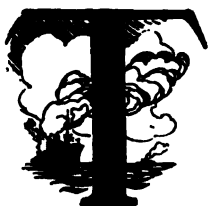
*"Sometimes I catch the look
in Cruikshank's eye, as he
watches her, as of a dealer
in old china."*

THE NEW
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATION

CHAPTER XXXI

THE KEY OF THE CABINET



HE three months of my visit are more than at an end. I have word that Clarissa's father has come to his expected rest, and she is even now upon the high seas looking toward these shores which have become her home.

After five long weeks, through the varying vicissitudes of her recovery, Bellwattle has returned to the Court, and for the last few days, still attended by her nurse, she has been making gentle excursions about the farm.

Sometimes I catch the look in Cruikshank's eye as he watches her as of a dealer in old china who, having broken a valuable specimen and received it back from the riveters, has for the first time realised its true value. He touches her tenderly, as though she might break again. As he walks upstairs with her in the evening to her bedroom, she leaning upon his arm, it is as though

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

he were placing her in a cabinet, turning the key and shutting her away against the ravages of dust or the slightest hazard of a clumsy hand.

The evening before last he came down to the study where I was sitting, with all the air of a man who has put his treasure safely away, and has secured the key carefully in his pocket.

"Has Clarissa ever run you up any bills?" he asked as he stood by the mantelpiece and filled his pipe.

"Good heavens, no!" said I. "What on earth——?"

"What will you do when she does?" he interrupted.

"Well, she won't," said I; "I make her a regular allowance, and she knows very well she can't exceed it."

"Does she know what your income is?"

"No," said I.

I was too surprised at his question to refuse an answer. It was completely hidden from me what he was driving at.

"I don't think any man is called upon," I added—"to let his wife know his income. So long as the allowance he makes her is consistent with the way they live, that's enough—isn't it?"

"She'll get a shrewd idea of your income sooner



"After five long weeks, through the varying vicissitudes of her recovery, Bellwattle has returned to the Court, and for the last few days, still attended by her nurse, she has been making gentle excursions about the farm."

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

or later," he replied, and there was a tone of bravado in his voice for which I could find no justifiable explanation. "When she comes to learn of your thousands, she'll have a very poor idea of her little hundreds; and what'll you do then when she starts a little account at—we'll say Nash and Wittersham's—and it mounts up and mounts up till they begin to get anxious, and look to the fountain-head of supplies for assurance, if for nothing more?"

"Women don't do that sort of thing," said I. "My God! If she did—well—there'd be the devil of a row. I'm not going to pat myself on the back, but I'm quite generous about the allowance I make her. I give her little presents besides. I think I should kick up a hell of a row."

He leant back against the mantelpiece, blowing clouds of smoke out of his mouth and chuckling with laughter.

"You're not married yet," said he. "I've told you that before. You only have a mistress and you're cock-sure you're going to be master. While Bellwattle's been ill and couldn't be worried I've had to open her letters for her. One hundred and eighty-five pounds' worth of bills have disclosed themselves in the process. I've just been showing them to her."

The Key of the Cabinet

"Didn't she know about it?" I asked in astonishment.

"Oh! she guessed right enough. I've seen the little look in her eye at post-time, like a cat watching for a mouse. In the most casual voice in the world, she's inquired whether there were any letters for her. Of course she's receiving all her correspondence now. But I've paid the bills while she was in the nursing-home, and I've got all the receipts, so that she has no communications from her creditors, and she can't make it out. She's had bills before, and I've paid them, and she's sworn she'll never have bills again. But she knows all about this hundred and eighty-five pounds. And sometimes she's been like the cat that's watching, and sometimes she's felt like the mouse that's caught. This evening I showed her all the receipts."

"What did she do?"

"She broke down and she cried like a baby, and she makes the most ludicrous grimaces when she cries. I calculate she shed just one hundred and eighty-five tears, if you can follow what I mean by that."

I confessed it was too subtle for me. My mind was fully occupied with wondering whether such experiences of married life as these were to be mine.

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"Why one hundred and eighty-five?" I asked.

"Well, every one of them was worth a pound to me, so I calculated there must have been one hundred and eighty-five, since I was that much out of pocket."

"You think she'll never do it again, you mean?"

He stood there in front of me, and he roared with laughter.

"Do it again!" he chuckled; "she'll go on doing it till she's an old dame with white lace caps, and every quarter-day she'll keep a quick eye on the post. Of course she'll do it again—and every time she's found out she'll cry—and every tear she sheds will close the fibres of those cords that hold us till a ship's cable'll be nothing in its strength to that which will secure us in our anchorage. I tell you you don't know what marriage is. Wait till you know your mistress for a deceitful, squandering, thriftless wench, and if you want her still, you can do without benefit of clergy."

He stood there smoking his pipe and looking down at me, and I'm damned if he didn't rattle the keys in his pocket.

Chapter XXXII
THE LAST EVENING



"On this occasion of my last evening at Lemington, Bellwattle walked across the orchard with me."

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST EVENING



THE evening before my departure, some few days after this conversation with Cruikshank, circumstance presented me with the only opportunity since her illness of having a talk with Bellwattle.

It had become my duty in her absence to feed the ducks and inveigle them home of an evening. I think on the whole, I was better at the job than Bellwattle, for if her blandishments were superior to mine, I, at least, was a better shot at throwing the corn in through the door of the house. Frequently she missed her aim, when the grains lay outside about the door and nothing would induce the ducks to go in so long as they could get food and freedom at the same time.

Once within their mansion, I also was quicker in getting to the door, securing the padlock and locking them in. In a farm where there are neigh-

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

bours and farm-hands and the intensive system is not employed, I would first of all recommend a padlock for making fowls lay.

On this occasion of my last evening at Lemington, Bellwattle walked across the orchard with me. We both whistled as we went, and the stream of ducks from all quarters of the farm waddled after us.

Presently she laid her hand lightly on my arm and ceased her whistling. I knew she was going to speak.

"Well, things have happened since you came here, A. H.," she said, gently, and again as before, I waited for her to set the measure of her confidence lest, in taking too great a handful, I might not be able to withdraw my hand from the vessel in which it was contained.

"I wonder what I ought to do," she went on presently, giving me her thoughts one by one, which is so much better than snatching for them and losing all.

"What do you mean—do?" said I, and in talking to a woman in this mood, one has to be so careful to keep that note in the voice with a slender balance between casualness and interest. It is as well to lower your usual register as you speak. The faintest hint of a jarring sound might frighten her.



*"The evening before my departure
circumstance presented me with the
only opportunity since her illness of
having a talk with Bellwattle."*

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

"Well," she continued, "what's poor old Cruikshank going to do? He loves children. I expect you've found that out."

"Mustn't he do what other people do in the same circumstances?"

In her simplicity, she asked what that was.

"Go without," said I abruptly.

She shook her head.

"The simplest way," said she—"would be to divorce me. It is ground for divorce— isn't it?"

I looked at her in bewilderment.

"Have you suggested that to him?" I inquired.

By some gesture or another, she indicated the negative.

"Well, try him," said I. "And have a table or some solid piece of furniture between you when you say it."

She laughed, and as suddenly became serious.

"I mean it, A. H.," she said; "it's more to him than a lot of men. Why should he miss it?"

"Is he the only one who misses it?" I inquired.

She screwed up her lips and suddenly taking a handful of corn out of my bowl, she threw it extravagantly to the ducks, nowhere near the vicinity of their hall door.

I took it upon myself then to tell her of all I had seen of Cruikshank during those hours and

The Last Evening

days while she was passing through her valley in the shadow.

"Cruikshank's taught me," said I, "by deed and word during these last five weeks—that I am little more than living in sin, and were it not for the benefit of an obliging clergyman who has been paid his fee, am no more a married man than the freethinker who lives with his lady in a Garden City."

"He's always extravagant in all the things he says," she laughed. "The funny part is he means them, and still funnier is the way they really sound true. Well—if you think I'm sufficient—Heaven knows I'm content to be."

"I'm not going to tell you what I think," said I, "I don't know whether I haven't told you too much already in letting you know what he feels."

She tightened her hand on my arm and, when I looked up quickly, I just caught sight of that ridiculous grimace Cruikshank told me she makes when she cries. It was gone in a second, and forcing a little smile in its place, she pointed to the pond to which the ducks had resorted in their impatience.

"How little a thing," said she—

"To remember for years

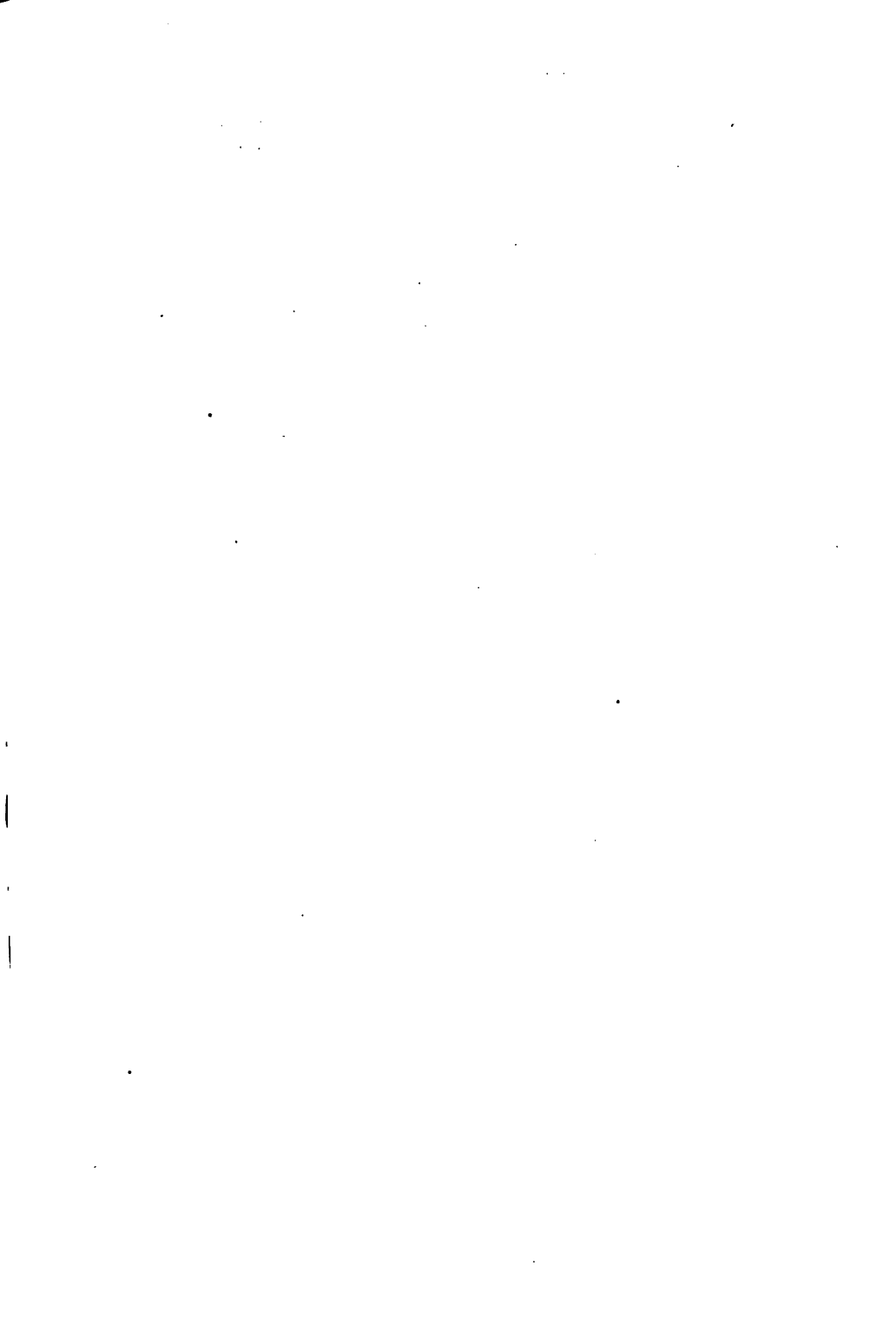
"To remember——"

Sheepskins and Grey Russet

“Oh, come on, A. H., let's get these ducks to bed.”

When the last duck was in and the door locked, we turned back to the house and through Cruikshank's bedroom window which overlooks the orchard, we heard the sound of whistling, and could just see him tying his tie in front of the glass.





This book is under no circumstances to be taken from the Building

[illegible]



1941

1942



